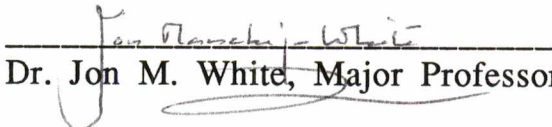


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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Andrew J. Dumsch entitled "Modern Televised Voodoo or Media Transient Visions." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


Dr. Jon M. White, Major Professor

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Date 4-26-93

***Modern Televised Voodoo
or
Media Transient Visions***

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Andrew J. Dumsch

May 1993

Abstract

This novella is a wacky hodgepodge of modern chaos. The crucial consideration is this: how do we define self when everything/ everyone else is doing the job for us? How do we create identity? Is the task akin to the video editing process where images (concepts) become the means used to shift about our fractured existence in the frantic attempt to create some sort of meaningful entirety?

This novella was composed entirely on a word processor. This adds another complex dimension to the editing/creating process of writing. If I can change **font**s, sizes, *etc.*, who is to say I can't manipulate much more? If I were so goofy as to fail to print out the text of this novella, I would lose everything if my computer disk were erased: my words would remain intangible, non-existent. When we fail to create solid identities, will we eventually become erased? Is your own Media Mistress (a.k.a. Muse) hard at work, fighting time and chaos to keep you remembered and whole?

Modern Televised Voodoo
o r
Media Transient Visions

A Word Video

written by
Drew Dumsch

edited by
The Media Mistress

"She liked to take Her time, and came to the point after interminable divagations down all the lane-ends of memory and overtone, feasting upon the golden pageant of all he had ever said, done, felt, thought, seen, or replied, with egocentric delight."

What I would have written had I been Thomas Wolfe writing this instead of
Look Homeward Angel.

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**** 1 ******The Media Mistress of My Mind**

There once was a very angry, little known, Off Off Off Broadway production that premiered to an audience of five. The production was a one act play called "Mass Media Mind-Warp Mistress," and it was not produced in Manhattan, or anywhere in New York City for that matter. "MMMWM" was a bizarre, one woman show that originated with no fanfare (or air-conditioning) at a small dance hall located above a seedy bowling alley in Hoboken, New Jersey. Due to circumstances unrelated to drama, I was in Hoboken that very hot summer night on leave from Africa and a strong hand chose me to become a member of the premier audience.

I had been hilariously drunk with a childhood friend at a bowling alley bar since 3 o'clock that afternoon. My friend, "The Fin," alternated between crying in his beer and sneezing on the emaciated Filipino behind the bar each time he laughed. He cried because he had just been fired from his only gig in the last two months. He laughed because I kept on reminding him that every woman he had dated back in Chicago had eventually dumped him because he made love, they said, like "a frantic fish out of water." I was the first one to call him "The Fin" to his face and the name stayed close to him as all stupid nicknames do, like a bad case of dandruff or halitosis.

Finny had left Chicago straight after high-school in order to burn his brand on the jazz world of The City, a.k.a. Manhattan. Coltrane was still heating up the scene yet somehow Finny thought it incredibly ground breaking to be a chubby Lutheran playing guitar for a black Baptist gospel choir; the novelty soon wore off and deep depression set in. The humorless

manager of the "Choir of the Sweet Redeeming Jesus" terminated my friend's contract after The Fin launched into a blues rendition of "Amazing Grace" on his Les Paul guitar while reciting lyrics from the Dylan Thomas poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" at the top of his lungs. You see, my friend was being controlled by pot and bourbon at the time and didn't realize that the entire choir and backup band, sans Finny, was quietly trying to pray for peace in war-torn Africa, peace in war-ravaged Asia, peace in the segregated South. They had all been huddled silently at the back of the church and Finny thought they were taking a coffee break-- everyone hunched over, blowing above their coffee to cool it. "That 'Amazing Grace' is such beautiful bebop," my friend told me and he began to cry again.

The Fin passed out around 8 o'clock that evening and I stumbled myself upstairs, looking for a bathroom so I could take a leak. My bladder had not been emptied since noon, which was quite amazing considering the many beers I had consumed. I was laughing loudly to myself about the oiltanker-like holding capacity of my bladder and I didn't realize that I was standing on a stage.

Someone was shushing me and the voice seemed to be coming from my bladder: the thought of a talking waste organ made me laugh even louder. A gentle but firm hand grabbed me by the back of the neck and pushed me down into a sitting position on a folding chair. I turned off my giddy beer perception and tried to open up sober eyes to appraise the current situation. A dignified looking black matron in a tasteful red muu-muu still had her hand on my neck. She smiled, released her grip and sat down next to me in another metal folding chair. Her husband, who happened to be the manager of the "Choir of the Sweet Redeeming Jesus," silently glared at me

from a chair on the other side of the dance hall stage. I tried to smile back at him. The parquet floor of the stage was ancient and warped and he and his identical twin boys who sat next to him had to lean way back to keep from falling forward out of their folding chairs. This lean, angry man across from me turned suddenly, his blue serge suit creaking, and he slapped at the two boys who were young, restless and bored.

"You've come to see my baby perform," said the lady next to me, "Bless your heart."

The July heat had come off the black asphalt streets and forced its way past the bouncer at the bowling alley door, humped its way up the stairs and filled the emptiness of the dance hall. Only the stage was lit: a 60 watt auto mechanic's lamp hung directly above my chair. My T-shirt stuck to the chairback with my sweat and its whiteness radiated beneath the harsh light of the single, bare bulb. Alcohol had taken away my sense of smell and I desperately wanted to breathe in the scent of the dignified matron sitting next to me. I needed suddenly to substantiate with my nose the realness of my sweat and the glaring dark face of the choirman across from me.

The matron crouched over a portable hi-fi beneath her legs, put the needle on the record, and that sweet deadly organ tune, "Green Onions," started playing softly, getting progressively louder throughout the short strange performance that began at that very moment. There was a drawn-out shriek from the silent further reaches of the dance floor. I jerked my head to the right and saw what looked like a naked woman run from the darkness and leap up onto the dimly lit stage. I could now see that she was not entirely naked because her smooth mahogany skin was dramatically

covered in special places with bits of toilet paper and torn newspaper scraps that were scotch-taped to her body.

I realize now that this woman was and is the most holy being I will ever see. She was lean and tall and sinewy; her bare, broad face expressed emotions that can never and will never be known to my own pathetic whitebread heart. Every shout of this young Negro flooded my heart with guilt about things I'd never even done. Every whisper coming off her lips and every toss of her shining sable hair created such an excruciating lust in me that I wanted to run away from her and love her all at once. Her every motion was pure sensual joy and yet her body seemed to writhe in agony. Her all too well-defined muscles caressed my eyes as she leapt from the stage to the dance floor and back again. The sweat dripping down my forehead had gradually steamed up my glasses. My vision went out of focus: the mist on my lenses only increased the mesmerizing aura surrounding the black matron's daughter, this "Mass Media Mind-Warp Mistress," as she denoted herself with a placard that she had pasted to her butt while dancing around the stage. Yes, she was warped. Yes, she was angry and at the same time too lovely to comprehend. But love probably wasn't the feeling I had that night - the emotion was more like fear. Fear of her energy, the anger, the dark unknown.

You know, even now, years later, the intellectual premise of this Mind-Warp play is still hazy in my mind. An educated guess is that it had to do with the manipulation of the nation's psyche via television, the advertising industry, the CIA-Pentagon fascist conspiracy and The New York Times. I do remember that after the preliminary shriek and appearance of the Media Mistress on stage, she darted behind the broken-down bandstand

at the back of the stage and pushed out a large warehouse cart covered with various props.

She grabbed a small movie camera from the cart and proceeded to film her family and me watching her using that noisy hand-held thing, an eight millimeter camera I think, and then she pulled out the film, exposing it to the light of the stage, set fire to it and flung it down on the dance floor. We watched the long ribbon of celluloid flare up violently as it bubbled a snaky path of heat across the old varnish of the dance floor. The lanky Mistress then took an immense illustrated volume of War and Peace, wrapped it up in a recent copy of The New York Times (I remember LBJ grimacing on the cover), and set that printed bundle on fire. She grabbed the beer bottle that I still somehow had clutched in my left hand and drowned out the flames before they had a chance to scorch the entire dance floor.

The last thing I consciously remember from that night is watching her unveil in the middle of the cart one of those old heavy wooden TV's with the small glass screen. Taped to the screen was a Life magazine picture of The Beatles playing on the Ed Sullivan show. The Media Mistress pulled down the auto mechanic's lamp from over my head and threw it at the television. The dance hall exploded into darkness as the television imploded with a flash of blue flame and, as I began to pass out, slowly sliding down out of the folding chair, the sense of smell returned to me: the acrid smell of crackling electric fire, the exotic tang of cumin and coriander (coming from the matron or The Mistress?), warm piss running down my leg...

I drove The Fin back to Chicago the next day. After a quick beer breakfast, we threw the pathetic remainder of his belongings (his landlady kept everything of value, including the Les Paul, as back payment on his rent) into my rented Plymouth Valiant, both of us vomited into the bushes and then we drove out of the pulsing heat of Hoboken. We stopped at the bowling alley on the edge of the city to pick up Finny's leather jacket left behind in the debauch the night before. I asked the Filipino bartender if the Media Mistress would perform upstairs again that night. He shook a thin arm at me and said, "What? You crazy, the dance hall has not been used in years, since the war at least." The dance hall was empty: the dusty air hung humid and motionless in the gloom.

I was much younger when this all happened. It no longer matters to me whether what I saw in the dance hall was an intoxicated dream or if the bartender was just unaware of the tenants upstairs (ignoring the angry shrieks of destruction coming from the Mistress). Will I ever see the Media Mistress again? This thought is not meant to be a romantic-poetic statement of tears. After such a fantastical night, real or unreal, I refuse to write an ode to the "mahogany mistress of my mind" or languish away in this urban Midwest apartment. But, since that planting of the Media Mistress in my memory so long ago, an intangible force keeps trying to rearrange the helter skelter string of randomness that has made my life so desperately modern, confusing, meaningless and blasé... I tell you now, *this* is my consuming vision and passion:

The Media Mistress sits at the editing console of my mind. She is creating an interpretive film of my life and She clips at the celluloid images of my life with a light dexterity and a determined willfulness. *Fade in on my*

sad loss of freedom when I married after returning from Africa. Jump edit to my head stuck in the porch railings as a child and my mother greasing my head with Crisco. Tight closeup on the tears rolling down my cheeks when we moved from Atlanta to Chicago. You see, it is my belief that it is She who is choosing and picking out the relevant bits of my life for me. She's become the modern voodoo queen of my brain, conjuring up random scenes of my life that would be better off forgotten. She's jabbing away at my waxen image with shards of desire and remorse. The Mistress sits before my mind editor, rehashing my most transient moments (*flinging boogers at my mother in anger*) and then manipulating them into meaningful three second images, like quick film edits. She is conjuring up my atrophied, back-water existence and transforming it into some sort of significant mind cinema of hope and despair. I believe that the Mistress has been using my life visions as material for her latest artistic *piece de resistance*. My life has become her art.

Okay, I will be the first to admit this mind control theory holds little psychological water but what I'm attempting to do here is to nullify the awful sense of randomness that the course of my life has given me. I must and will believe that the Media Mistress now controls my identity. I must believe this for the sake of my endurance and sanity in the coming years as I spiral down towards death and nothingness. With no thematic meaning to life how are we to fill the void?

Sometimes I am fearful that with every toss of Her long sable hair, with every ripple of Her forearm hovering above the reels and spools of my life, She is getting too close to creating a definitive, pre-packaged version of my life. Definitive means The End, see? And The End means no more mystery. Strange as it seems, I somehow desire both mystery and meaning

out of life because I am a greedy bastard and yet I don't think She realizes the fine balance required to sustain enigmatic fulfillment. All *She* wants is an Oscar before She is thirty. Not to be petty, I believe Her production values inside my brain are more suitable for the vapid gloss of Madison Avenue commercials than the vapid glitz of Hollywood. Her editing style is not subtle, having the speed of a phantom jet, a speed which can be awfully hard on my old grey matter. You see, Her three second metaphors strung rapidly together make confusion in my brain, not some epic film statement on the state of my reality. I am not and never will be an epic. Consider me the anti-Iliad of Chicago!

**** 2 ******The Mistress (Editor) Confers With Drew (Writer)**

Media Mistress: I think I should warn any reader in search of some truer sense of the "here and now" that my psychic tendency has always been to think on "how it should be" rather than "how it is." What I mean to say is that if I was ever lucky enough to rub elbows or mix grey matter with a genius like Einstein, I'm sure I'd still come away not only angry that he had not revealed to me The Word to make life worth living but also angry that he didn't even humor me by cracking walnuts against his forehead. So now I ask my writer, is this word video of ours going to be a matter of "how it is" or "how it should be?"

Drew: Should that matter?

Media Mistress: I think... why yes! of course it does you existential slug! I hope you haven't decided to go writing a slick autobiographical procession of raunch across these following pages, creating an insidious type of pseudo-literary filth that indicts your family as a bunch of pedophiles and your friends as coke-snorting psychos and your woman as a cold-hearted nymphomaniac. You should learn never to even contemplate such an abuse of your authorial privileges. Remember, fiction is always better (and more satisfying) than fact.

Drew: Lighten up O Mistress Myne. Anyways, because this is *my* fiction, *my* fable, *my* fart reeking of falsehood straight into the wind, I plan to--

Media Mistress: If you situate yo' ass upwind, the methane will blow back on you and all your loved ones.

Drew: O, go screw! Look, I'll admit I haven't lived in a reality vacuum these past twenty five years. If "how it is" and "how it was" creeps into my writing and becomes "how it should be," well then it does. Anyway, our word video reality won't have to be as mundane as the fact that I stepped on a bumblebee when I was five and my mother mixed up a poultice of baking soda to soothe my sole. Our fictive flow can be as abstract and as cool as ether inside Aristotle's brain, depending on how you decide to edit what I come up with. However, so we can cover our collective happy ass against litigation, I will give the common disclaimer at the end of all movies produced by Hollywood distributors with ulcer-ridden lawyers: "This here's a fictive work. If you recognize yourself, tough. It ain't you!"

Media Mistress: If you give the reader the sense that you don't want to charm them with your fictive sense of reality, then how do you expect--

Drew: Hold on now. We can blow theoretical chunks out our ears and noses forever without ever getting to the meat of this here word video. However, I guess I better enlighten everyone on my narrative intent, since you are quite hot on there being one to make you feel somewhat semi-coherent as you edit together my jumble of mental images into your modern televised voodoo. So, Mistress, get yourself situated at the editing console of the Macintosh Plus PC and get ready for the raw footage...

I was walking down Addison Street in Chicago a few weeks ago with my dear and lovely Sicilian lady friend because we were going to hear an old high school buddy of mine play at a Polish jazz club on Pulaski Avenue. It was raining so hard that I was unwilling to hold hands with my woman, however warm the touch of her skin might be. Our tennis shoes were squishing and the free bank umbrella was leaking and we still had several blocks to go before reaching the promised smoky crowded warmth of the Club Podajazzurewski. We were keeping our heads low to the ground and the falling rain droplets were hitting the concrete so loudly and decisively that I didn't realize someone was walking behind us and trying politely to get around us without being forced to step on the wet strips of grass on either side of the sidewalk. I felt a gentle bump on my left elbow and then heard the heavy splash of a body falling backwards into a puddle. Benedetta and I stopped walking and turned around. We were near a street corner and the thick orange light of the street lamp undulated on the surface of the puddle where a young white man

sat in a London Fog trench coat and soaked his rear end in a pool where many soggy nightcrawlers had surfaced to die.

Benedetta put up a concerned hand to her mouth but said nothing. (I could tell she would laugh loudly once she knew the guy was alright.) "Geez-us, are you okay?" I asked and offered him a hand to get up. "These damn leather soles got no grip on the grass and now here I am, down on my ass," he replied with a sort of bemused chagrin and pointed to his water-stained Florsheim's. I wondered if he had intended to make a rhyme out of his declaration but I never got to ask. He and I locked hands across space, right hand to right and suddenly made eye contact. He rose swiftly with my help, slicked back his rain-soaked thinning hair with his left hand, picked up his black leather attaché case from the puddle (I hoped it was waterproof), gingerly rubbed his right knee and then walked away, turning down the side street at the corner. After going about ten yards he stopped and turned around. "Thanks," he said quietly; I could barely hear him over the splash of rain drops. Then he turned back away and walked into the night. "How odd," said Benedetta, "He looked like some sort of Reaganite CPA but there was an MTV sticker and a red Rolling Stones lips button on his briefcase."

Media Mistress: Wait a minute. Is she claiming that there's a contradiction between rock-n-roll and successful careerism? Young Republicans watch music videos as fervently as--

Drew: Hold it! Time's running out so let me finish. This guy walks away and I suddenly had this feeling I had known him all my life-- perhaps even before birth. He could have even been my clone with his short brown hair and tired red eyes like mine and his nose almost as hooked and hawkish as my own ethnic shnozz. Physical resemblance aside, when we clasped hands and made eye contact I swear there was some sort of psychic communion that passed between us. At that moment my perception suddenly seemed to narrow until only that young man and myself were facing off at the universal poker table of reality and, low and behold, when I called what I considered to be his bluff with a ten buck raise it turned out that we were both holding full houses. Identical full houses. Weird.

Media Mistress: You've lost me with your corny card metaphor but I think what you're talking about it is a Joycean epiphany. Either that or latent homosexuality.

Drew: What?!?!

Media Mistress: What I mean to say is the your ultimate sense of reality crystallized at the moment you connected with this guy-- let's give him the name of Dwayne for that sounds heartland enough for this Midwest encounter of yours-- both physically and mentally, which is akin to falling in love.

Drew: Sometimes I look at you and wonder where the hell you come up with this shit. I suppose that's what a cerebral New York college education has done for you: you're now about as obtuse and slithery as a Pentagon official before a congressional committee. Just let me finish this prologue before the reader begins to scarify herself or himself out of tedium by inflicting paper cuts with these crisp pages. Okay... this guy, call him Dwayne, walks away, I think I know him as a sort of spiritual twin and then-- honest to God, women are psychic-- Benedetta turns to me and says, "That's you to a T if you had a practical degree in media marketing instead of a BA in do-gooder liberal arts education. I would bet he pulls in 60 G's as an adman for some slick Chicago firm... you could do worse, lover." As we sat in the Polish bar later that night, our clothes steaming and our skin pruned like wet, shriveled apricots, I was unable to focus on my beer, or on my friend's frenzied sax solos up on the stage, or on my lover, or on the wetness of my tennies. I was fully preoccupied with the fact that I didn't have enough money in my wallet to buy a second beer and I didn't have the intellectual stamina to keep on spinning abstract theories on medieval literature so I could get a Ph.D. in English while MTV became the pre-eminent molder of reality for our youth as our blue earth began to cough up huge clots of blood, CO2, and hate.

For that matter-- I thought to myself while nursing my one and only beer-- why should I even keep the pathetic goatee growing on my chin when it was just a scraggly hunk of facial hair

that confused and/or amused everyone who met with it. Maybe this Dwayne, with his smooth face, rich leather goods, and soft, manicured hands had The Answer, at least to that last one of my many nagging ruminations. Probably not, but then we can all find out together by voyeuraging through these following pages. So readon reader, readon, readon.

Mistress: Childhood Dwayne footage coming right up.

**** 3 ******Connected at Heart, Knee, TV**

“Love, love, love until it does no good then kill,” my father would whisper, his sad voice echoing softly off the cold white linoleum tiles of the bathroom floor. He would share this mantra of modern futility with anyone who cared to listen and then begin to rap his knuckles against the old cast-iron bathtub, beating out a desperate tempo of despair. He’d stop only when his knuckles began to bleed, then he’d retch with an agonizing finality into the toilet bowl and fall into unconsciousness, his head cradled in the woven-cotton towels from India that he always pulled down off the bathroom wall. These towels were dyed in hard to spell words like magenta, ochre, puce, and vermilion.

When my sister and I were still small, cute, and connected at the knees, we would play “Giant Squid versus Moby Dick” with the huge cast-iron bathtub as our ocean battleground. Whoever got to be Moby Dick won, of course. Whale fat lights the lamps of the world while fried squid is just a rubbery meat that Wops and Guidos put on their vermicelli. Mom would often have to use all the towels in the bathroom to dry up the watery overflow of our bathtub war. The Indian colors would bleed out of those towels onto the floor and turn the linoleum tiles into a cool rainbow slick. Bebe, my good girl Americanese twin, and I, the negative of her positive, would slap our bare toddler butts down onto the slippery linoleum, painting our bodies like native warriors, and then we would dance up on top of the toilet seat. With my right knee

fused to Bebe's left knee, shared bone and ligament since birth, if one of us fell off the toilet seat, we would both fall. This genetic fusion of limbs made us very adept at toilet dancing and we looked every bit the parts of dwarf Polynesian priest and priestess, locked in a primal celebration of seawaring victory. Bebe would whip her long blonde tresses around her head like eel grass and my frantic foot stomping would turn my little wiener into a percussive wand to beat out the tempo. Our father would stand in the doorway of the bathroom, his fingers laced into the belt loops of his jeans, and laugh hysterically. "Oh, my little mambo muu-muus, you're going to kill me," I can remember him saying and then Mom turning to him and yelling, "Where were you, you dumb bastard, to help me dry this floor?" and then she snapped at him with wet rainbow cotton.

Before Mom divorced our father (Bebe and I were five when she finally got around to the legalities a year after he disappeared), he averaged about fifteen "love then kill" episodes a year, about one a month. It took just two beers and a small joint of marijuana to push him into the realm of violent existential stupidity (which is how my mother referred to it in the following years). After he passed out in the bathroom-- where he would migrate like an old elephant slumping off to die-- Mom would lock him in for safety's sake: his safety, ours, and the living room windows'. During one of the episodes he awoke with a sudden jolt and smashed his forehead into the dewy porcelain bottom of the toilet tank. He had howled in pain and then rushed into the living

room and broke all the windows facing the street by hurling out our new red volumes of World Book Encyclopedia onto the small brown lawn below. Our Polish neighbors on Addison Street began milling around on the sidewalk outside our apartment, carefully and ever so politely crouching down to look at the books as if a street vendor had set up a knowledge stand on this early spring evening as a public service to help their Polack minds cope with the brave new world of ideas named Chicago, Illinois, United States of America.

During the locked-in phase of his episodes, my twin and I would crouch on the other side of the bathroom door and listen closely to our father's heavy irregular breathing. Bebe and I would hold hands, knees locked together, and slow our breathing until we were synchronized with the heavy rattling of his alcohol-soaked lungs in the loo. Some-times it felt as though we could almost match our heartbeats into a tripartite of love: Bebe's heart beating with mine, my heartbeat matching our father's. Eventually Mom would shoo us away from the door and make us go watch TV. After taking in ten minutes of enthusiastic sugar-cereal ads and dynamite color cartoons, our young hearts were no longer in tune with our father's. His tired muscle pumped out blood to veins that felt there was no longer any rhyme or reason to coursing their way through history: his heart had lost all desire.

On the other hand, our little blood pumps were now linked directly to the vacuum tubes of nonstop information and the hyper-vapid coursing of material desire through our veins was really what

the wizards of the TV tubes wanted. But in those early days of life we couldn't even articulate that yearning for all the material bounty that could be bought in Chicago, Illinois, United States of America, and any connections between history, pain, and desire meant little to us when Wily Coyote blew himself up with a sizzling stick of TNT.

As our father lay passed out on the bathroom floor, Bebe and I watched the exploding coyote plummet off the desert cliff and we both howled in laughter: it was just too funny. It made us want to squish Twinkies against our foreheads in the joyous glee of the here and now.

**** 4 ******Rory and the African Goods Import Truck**

Bebe and I were defused at the knee when we were three years old, or nearly almost four. Living stuck to my sister didn't seem so bad at the time except for the fact that whenever I had to pee, which was most of the time when I was three and incontinent, Bebe would have to come along and stand by the toilet while I watered my lily. "Dwayne," she'd shake her head sadly at me and say in her most serious little girl voice, "Dwayne, you are one stupid pee-pee." Then I would cry. Mom began to realize that her twins were no longer conveniently unified babies that she could just slap diapers on and never have to worry about wandering off alone anywhere fast since we had to hop-jump like frogs when we wanted to get somewhere quickly.

At three my sister and I were still fused at the knees because our family surgeon, who was also Mom's brother Ron, didn't think he had the courage to separate us: he might screw up and then he would be faced with the familial nightmare of having made his favorite (and only) niece and nephew pitiful Tiny Tim hobblers. He also knew our family didn't have enough financial clout to pay for the operation. Since our father had come back from Africa four years earlier, he had mostly been writing for a pacifist journal out in Skokie that paid very little and gave no benefits (except for the plethora of bar mitzvahs invitations).

Mom got him to sit up on the toilet seat one morning after another bathroom episode and gave him the ultimatum: "Either

you get a decent job so we can divide the kids or else I divide our marriage. Can you imagine the humiliation they will face if they have to go to senior prom attached at the knee? I won't even go into the implications of puberty on connected co-ed twins." Father Rory O'Coole, journalist and third generation American Mick, was in such an ashamed state of being after his wife's verbal lambasting that he felt reasonable (though probably not *responsible*) enough to get a decent job as a political reporter for the Chicago Tribune: within six months there was plenty of money and Uncle Ron had enough courage to separate Bebe and Dwayne, the Wonder Twins of the Windy City.

After the surgery we weren't intriguing oddities to anyone anymore (no more "my what adorable mutants you have" to our mother in the park), though in times of stress Bebe and I still tended to hold hands tightly and rubs our knees together for comfort. Even now, at twenty-five, when I am sad and lonely (which seems to be a constant state of being), my right knee will unconsciously bend out to touch the left knee partner that is no longer there.

Rory O'Coole was a desperately incompetent father and, in truth, he sucked at just about every life skill except investigative reporting (he enjoyed rooting out other people's foibles and fuck-ups) and even that talent was not consistent for him after he returned from Africa. Rory had been a roving journalist for UPI throughout the mid-60's in Rhodesia and Kenya and many other countries whose names have changed with the Third World

Marxist revolution and he finally decided that he didn't want to see any more poor African farmers burned blacker than their own skin by gasoline and tar. He was tired of having to put his hands up when Soviet sub-machine guns were pointed at him and he would have to yell to save his life: "American journalist! Christ! American journalist!" Yes, he'd seen little loving and plenty of killing over on the dark continent and, when he returned home to Chicago, he fell in love with the first secretary who smiled at him at the Midwest UPI bureau. She was a vivacious and clean white 19 year old farmgirl from Iowa, which Rory thought perhaps to be the furthest one can get from a dirty poor black African who is lying dead in a ditch.

Consider Rory O'Coole to be the unseen seed of my story. He is the blood father of me (Dwayne) and Bebe. He can take 50% credit for our oddly-fused zygotes. He could have also have taken credit for our names but his wife, Miriam O'Coole, found little humor in his idea of what acceptable monikers for children should be. When us twins were born to young Miriam, Rory intended to name one Burutu and the other one Mogan (I'm not even sure which one designated for me).

Even though early on in their marriage my mother thought of Rory O'Coole as a wise, dashing and adventurous older man, she drew the line on this exotic naming notion of his. "We'll call the boy Dwayne after my dear dad and the girl will be named Mirabelle which I saw in a play once and I think means 'beautiful in the mirror' in French," she informed him from her hospital bed

in the maternity ward. Rory consented to these labels but he still attempted to put his mark on us by calling me "Dudane" and Mirabelle "Bebe" after some odd Zen notion of his.

I remember one night when my sister and I were four and a half, about a year after having been detached at the knees. Rory had his first beer in hand for the evening (Mom being out shopping) and he decided he would indulge us with a story of his happier past. "Sit on my knees Dudane and Bebe, but don't you kids be rubbing your knees together whilst I tell my story or you'll distract me."

A week later, an African Goods Import Truck manufactured by Ford Automotive Company drove past the downtown office of the Chicago Tribune. Witnesses report that Rory was crying at the street corner and, when the truck stopped at a red light, he hopped into the open back, diving in amongst the elephant foot trash cans, ebony statuettes, and cheetah skins. He was never seen again. Because his storytelling that night we sat on his lap is the closest and most intimate thing that I can remember between my father and me, I seem to retain it in my mind as though it had been videotaped on a high resolution 3/4 inch tape. (However, I admit that at the age of four I had no clue about what he was trying to say.) This is how the stories goes:

There once was a very angry, little known, Off Off Off Broadway production that premiered to an audience of five. The production was a one act play called "Mass Media Mind-Warp Mistress," and it was not

produced in Manhattan, or anywhere in New York City for that matter.

"MMMWM" was a bizarre, one woman show...

**** 5 ******Dwayne Inherits Loneliness and Rory's Mistress**

It was a lucky thing that I had stopped walking to check out my shoes or I might have missed seeing the wasp tear apart the butterfly on the bank of the aqua-green river, a sad and sluggish tributary to the Mississippi. This was four years ago when there were recently posted signs on the edge of the river: Do Not Make Bodily Contact With River, Water Does Not Meet Biological and Chemical Specifications. I have not gone back since then to see if those sentinel specifications are still standing guard over the southern aqua-green river. The carp, however, never seemed to care about specifications as they swam in that strange hue of H2O-- they were fat and fulsome and would come to the surface to lip upon the chunks of whitebread that the children threw out to them-- but would you want to swim in an aqua-green river?

Now the smallish Green Comma butterfly (*Polygonia Faunus*) does have streaks of aqua-green running across its wispy wings and its cousin, the Gray Comma (*Polygonia Progne*), could at times be confused with a light chunk of the sluggish river escaping up into the cold morning mist, but notice that the sentence concerning water quality in the previous paragraph ends in a Question Mark (*Polygonia Interrogationis*), a mid-sized butterfly of tan wings with scalloped edges and black spots scattered across the surface of its body. The Question Mark has a more of an orangish-green tinge to its wings than either the Green or Grey Commas which leads one to believe, based solely on strange coloration, it would be even less

wise to swim in a river of Question Marks. But the wasp didn't seem to mind that it was doing a modified breast stroke on top of our butterfly in question. The wasp was one of those feisty little amber killers with thin black dagger wings and it had the beautiful tan Question Mark in a full-nelson wrestling hold.

The wasp stood firmly on the back of the butterfly and the predator used its black dagger wings to pin the orangish-green wings of its prey against the edge of the river bank pathway. I had been looking down at my shoes because I suddenly caught a whiff of dog shit and, sure enough, I found out that I had stepped in a prodigious pile of Doberman crap a few yards back but my olfactory nerves immediately shut down upon seeing the overpowering stimulation of the life and death struggle betwixt wasp and butterfly. The wasp continued applying pressure to the Question Mark's neck until its head snapped off. A thick aqua-green goo oozed out and the wasp sucked it up most complacently.

"Wow," myself said to my brain and just then a Sunday afternoon cyclist in glowing orangish-green lycra leotards ran over the wasp and its so recently won carcass.

"Holy fuck," myself said to my brain in disgust, "That cyclist is just proof that mankind, driven by fear of death, is obsessed with trying to stomp out all examples of natural selection."

I thought it quite a natural selection that after graduating from Purdue, I should take my very useful degree in Mass Marketing and move to the newly industrialized South to work in the public relations department of Dame Desu Enterprises. Dame

Desu is a Japanese manufacturer of high density shiny lycra goods used on the sports field and in the bedroom. With Asian know-how at the front office and cheap redneck labor on the working floor, bike shorts that never bind during triathlons and camisoles that never rip during Friday night lust were manufactured to bring convenience to the energetic consumers, prosperity to the burgeoning hamlet of Kudzu, Alabama, and a toehold in the American active-wear market for Dame Desu.

All the top echelon bosses at Desu had banana colored skin and spoke broken, breathy English. They insisted that desks at the front office were to be lined up straight and in even rows and that in the attempt to make company communication a communal process there were to be no private cubicles for departmental powwows or lunch time screws. *"Good Business Has Nothing To Hide,"* said a sign above the desk of my immediate supervisor, Hiro "Bob" Takiyaki. Bob had hired me straight out of college with the belief that I would be boldly creative without the high price tag of the standard huge Western business ego. I was hired to help make Dame Desu Active Wear a favored household word by utilizing my marketing manipulation prowess. My final contribution to this company goal was this advertising slogan, *"Nothing is as Finey as a Sexy, Shiny Hiney: Dame Desu Lycra Active Wear."* Unfortunately, Bob Takiyaki thought the slogan embarrassingly unsubtle, though he never actually told me so to my face. By presenting such a distasteful concept to him I had unwittingly made a cultural blunder and thereafter was never

invited to his raw fish, fresh sex smelling sushi buffets that he held at his old restored southern mansion every Friday night.

I lasted one fall-winter-spring cycle at Desu before I went crazy with loneliness and quit and moved back to Chicago where I've worked as an adman at Media Midwest ever since. My one true consoling occupation, at least at first, during those months of solitude was the creation of my mind videos. There was no movie theater in Kudzu and the one video store there stocked mainly cassettes with either guns or bikinis on the cover and guns make me think about death and death makes me think about sex and when I think about sex I think about bikinis so you see what a vicious cycle of despond-ency that video store would have caused me had I frequented it. But don't automatically label me as a hopeless introvert, dear reader, for I did initially try to break the solitude of life in the South by being friendly with my neighbors:

"I don't do business with Jews," my middle-aged neighbor lady down the hall said as she slammed the door in my face.

"Ma'am, I'm just your new neighbor and your mail got put in my box," I replied in a placating voice to coax her to reopen the door, "Ma'am? I'm a Baptist, ma'am," I said and suddenly my voice slid into the slow deep-south accent. In my nine months below the Mason-Dixon line I always seemed to acquire a throaty twang every time I got flustered and self-conscious in public, like the time I ran a four-way stop sign on the way to work and the sleepy, stocky sheriff's deputy pulled me over.

"Son, you know what you just done?" he asked as he leaned his bulk in through my rolled down driver's window.

"I-I-I-I reckon I ran that-that there intersection, su-su-sir," I replied as the deputy shook his head, most likely thinking to himself, "Damn, just what we need on top of all these Nip industrialists, a Yankee who stutters in a godawful fake southern accent."

In the apartment above me lived two young men who worked on the evening shift at Dame Desu. They both were skinny to the point of nonexistence and had long stringy hair. One favored wearing black heavy metal T-shirts and jeans while the other one wore T-shirts that publicized such organizations as A.M.D.A (American Muff Divers Association) and he always had a paint splattered Agrico-Fertilizer cap up on his head. We were polite enough to each other when we met in the hallway but at 3AM when they returned from work (or the bar?) they got in the ugly habit of playing either Hank Williams Junior ("*Do you wanna to dance, do you wanna party?*") or some type of satanic rock ("*We're off to see the Witch, we may never never never come home!*") as loud as their amplifiers would allow without exploding into blue smoke and flames.

My bed would shake and I would scream and the music would just get louder and once I jammed cotton balls bought at the local Piggly Wiggly store so far down my ear canals that I have to use safety pins to pull them out again. Eventually I began playing back my Perry Como and Dean Martin records ("*When the*

moon's in the sky like a big pizza pie, that's amore.") at 7AM when they were finally asleep and I was getting ready for work. An uneasy and hostile truce between Yankee and the Johnny Rebs was called.

But cultural warfare wasn't enough to keep my mind preoccupied and away from the loneliness inside of me and when it got really bad I began to think about Rory O'Coole, the disappearing seed of our story. I would think about him lying passed out on the bathroom floor and about how excited he became as he told Bebe and me about his Media Mistress. One night after calling my mother and having a hopeless argument about the difference between moths and butterflies-- "Dwayne, anything smaller than a Monarch is a moth." "No Ma, if the wings are connected at the side and go back and forth, moth, but if they go up and down at the top of the back, butterfly!"-- I fell into a fitful and somewhat hostile sleep.

I dreamt that I sat as a full-grown man on Rory's knee in my old childhood bedroom back at the apartment on Addison Street. Rory put his arm around my shoulder and then pointed to the door of my bedroom closet and said with father-to-son pride, "With me gone, She's all yours now, Dudane!" I got up off his lap and walked over to the door and opened it. The Media Mistress was in my closet wearing my bath robe. "I've decided to switch from 8mm film to 3/4 inch video," She said and pointed to the new Sony editing console that filled my closet, "I had to get rid of your toys and school clothes to fit the new equipment in here. I

hope you don't mind me wearing your bathrobe. I'm naked and it's freezing in here!"

After that initial dream, the Mistress would come to me nightly. "Got your popcorn?" She'd ask and then I'd sit behind Her at the editing console, eating popcorn and watching Her rearrange some of the more amusing vignettes from my life into cute little sitcoms. *Bebe and I as bare-assed toddlers dancing the Polynesian Hoochy-Coo in the bathroom.* But soon She became greedy and wasn't satisfied to control only the reality of my dream state; She wanted to move on into the manipulation of my waking reality. At almost any time, whether sleeping or awake, I was apt to have the hot jet tails of Her current version of my life come streaking across what had been the clear grey sky of my brain. Eventually my existence fragmented itself into two separate entities: 1) fits of lucidity where I seemed to be in control of my grey matter and was willing to accept the tedious flow of everydayness and 2) the hallucinogenic continuity of the Mistress's mind numbing aphasia. Whenever Her most recently edited segment was played in my mind, I lost all contact with the world and became speechless as if caught in a *petit mal* seizure. I could keep on doing my current physical activity-- driving, eating, walking, lovemaking-- but I was no longer able to communicate logically and/or viscerally. Only some intense sensual bomb exploding outside my brain and impacting my senses would pull me back to the true dizzying spin of the globe. For example, this is the sensual feast that fed me back to lucidity after my hallucinogenic winter fast in Kudzu:

I remember during my one springtime in the South how it rained for five days straight and when it finally cleared up, the brown lawns of winter changed overnight into shag carpets of green. Wild chives sprouted up in the grass of the lawns of Kudzu and the husbands of the hamlet, their cheeks thick with chewing tobacco, drove out on their riding lawn mowers for the first cut of the year. For days after, the air smelled like a fresh garden salad. It became so humid that spring that mushrooms began to form their little domes under my bathroom sink and the breezes that blew in soft through the open windows of my apartment were what Thomas Wolfe would have called "the exquisite smell of the South, clean but funky, like a big woman." Watching the mockingbirds flirt with one another outside my apartment window, I finally wilted with loneliness and handed in my resignation to Bob Takiyaki. I missed the aqua-blue water of Chicago, I missed my sister's knee, I missed my mother's niggling arguments, and I missed this strangely attractive Aryan woman named Leanne: thoughts of her kept occupying certain sections of my brain ever since we met the previous summer on the coast of Maine. I think I wanted to marry this energetic young dame and spend my life with her, but at the time I wasn't quite sure if it fit into Her editing plans for my future.

**** 6 ******The Mistress Speed Condenses Dwayne's Mind Video**

I was a born a howling little wretch, pulled far too soon from my mother's womb. Wrenched from the warm comfort and safety of her anesthetizing woman-orb, I was thrust under the harsh glare of a 60 watt auto mechanic's lamp. The black midwife's hands reeked of cumin and coriander and my mother shouted far beyond any gravid pains I may have caused her. I have not yet filled my guilt quota.

My past is being conjured up to substantiate the random nature of my here and now. The fast flow of images that will be televised in these following pages will be laughed at by those "in the know." On the other hand, derision may arise or confusion result. Viz: what in the hell is this guy on?!?

First come my mental bugaboos... *those who make me nervous*: blacks, whites, bums, rich bastards, mental deficientes, geniuses, women and men. I am not black. I'm unable to sing like James Brown. I am afraid of forgetting to say "African-American." I am whitebread. I cannot call myself "Euro-American" because the term is considered a redundancy. Does that mean I'm redundant? I used to walk through a certain city park and always this dirty old man with one leg would ask for my money. I had to refuse on account of the thickness of my wallet; he would think me cheap to give only one dollar. I now avoid city parks and that poor bum of a vet thinks of me as a rich bastard. (Bear with this puritan accounting. She wants to quickly purge my life video of dross American confessionalism.)

I tremble at the thought of young Einsteins and child morons. They are flip sides of the mental coin. I find the extremes of stupidity and brilliance too urgent to respond to with the necessary amount of compassion and I put little faith in eugenics evening the score. (Someone once said that the only true equalizer is death.)

If this were a catholic movie, I would now be awfully close to contrition. There would be a close-up of the priest's benign smile over on his side of the confession booth and then a quick cut to a medium shot of me, grimacing but already visibly lightened from my desperate load of bigotry and perdition. After this next paragraph, visualize the scene in the catholic movie, The Mission, where Robert DeNiro prostrates himself before what he believes to be a vengeful God in the steaming jungles of South America. A dark sinewy native in a loin cloth cuts off the overwhelming burden of metal armor that is tied to DeNiro's back and kicks it over a cliff. Jeremy Irons, who plays the pacifistic Jesuit priest, smiles a holy smile. I'm nearly there.

I want to be valid to the common man and/or attractive to the uncommon woman. As of yet, I've experienced neither situation and I'm beginning to get nervous. In fact, the whole idea of sex makes me nervous. I cannot kiss the men I love. Faggotry has its own built-in come-on signals. So I will respect my fellows from the required distance. On the other hand, I will always kiss the women I love. May they never mistake my affection as a slander to the substantial rights of their gender. I respect very much the maternal pain of childbirth: I have a mother.

Because this mind video is not wholly mine, the protagonist (the fictive Dwayne as apposed to the real Dwayne) will resemble me only when She wishes him to. The petty prejudices in evidence above can be those of the protagonist. This fictitious young man will be afforded a modicum of empathy in the narrative, but he will also be fast-forwarded past any sentimental sympathy. When sympathy and empathy cohabit the same written space, they become synergistic like coffee and cigarettes; they burn off the reader's energy and leave only noncritical exhaustion. And I do so want you all to be critical with me, dear readers. It's the only way for me to get pop psychoanalysis for free.

She promises that the protagonist might have many strange and noble intentions in the following chapters but please realize that only his actions will count for anything. (Intentions, though sincere enough when conceived, seldom make good commodities in the result-oriented market of human relations.) Fast transitions will edit the narrative:

My intention last night was to sleep deeply and to perfect my rem's. Unfortunately, through the darkest hours of the night I was troubled by a dream involving George Sanders. He was sitting at my kitchen table, smoking my cigarettes one by one and making lewd passes at my mother, who was at the gas range cooking eggs. The dream ended, as dreams always do, with me falling off a cliff. She fastforwarded me to a quick awake, swiftly editing out my bloody death on the canyon floor.

George Sanders is lord of the 40's-50's suave school of cinematic acting. (Without losing the part in his hair, he saved the world from satanic alien children in the film Village of the Damned.) He destroyed his mind with a service revolver. His suicide note was as dry and succinct as his Method. "I'm bored," wrote George.

Life is tedious and so it must be expanded and reworked beyond the logical boundaries of reality in an attempt to make it more tolerable and palatable. I am never Georged because She is able to extend any mundane sensory experience I have into a vivid three second metaphor. My life has as much abundance and significance as your best Italian operas. For example:

When I was nine, my step-father decided the time had come for me to open a bank account. "Son, you can't shirk your responsibilities as a consumer." I remember holding \$23.49 in a Mason Jar and feeling the burden and pride of joining the free market economy and accruing interest on my American currency.

Mother's Note: Son, you are a liar. You were brought forth cesarean. The hospital was sterile and efficient. The doctors and nurses were as white as the sheets I lay upon, unconscious to your screams. You must admit you were born in tandem with my girl child.

I had stolen the \$23.49 from my twin sister's piggy bank.

The financial institution that my step-father selected for me had huge panels of stained glass above the transoms at the entrance. I remember the 3 o'clock sun shining directly through

this random arrangement of Modernist glass and transfiguring portions of the bank lobby with its light. I carefully placed my Mason Jar down on the grey linoleum and walked straight into the colored air. Red, green, violet, azure: these tinted sunbeams blended with the floating dust, the wax shine on the floor, my dancing body; they softened the sterile business air. My metaphor here is happiness. A clean simplistic happy.

I visualize my step-father positioned far off from the colors, avoiding their swash of softness and standing rigidly embarrassed on the cold grey linoleum. Did She create for him a metaphor of this past event? I doubt it. My step-father hopes to renegotiate his sad life. I can never know his life's metaphors. He has none. She gave him none.

But I bet he would like to have his life edited like mine. He watches enough television to know that a decent plot and fast pacing relieve tedium, that flashbacks can resolve old wounds, that commercials provide a much-needed rest before the climax of a story. Many of these commercials also provide the men of America with vivid sexual fantasies.

I would like to think that the beer I drink could cause spontaneous orgies in my backyard. My young wife tells me that although these beer-ad bimbos are ample, they are an anomaly.

"Have you ever, in true life, seen a fashion model?" she asks me.

"Yes, I once saw Brooke Shields far off in a crowd of fur coats, but she looked anorexic... too lightweight for lust," I reply. My

answer to her is the only untruth that will be acknowledged in this story.

Time now for a recipe break:

My Mother's Scrambled Eggs: Take four free-range eggs, crack each one individually over a mixing bowl and watch the viscous stuff slide out of the shell into the bowl. Whip eggs, but do not froth. Above the mixing bowl unleash a dash of black pepper, a liberal amount of garlic powder and two drops of Tabasco Hot Sauce. Pour eggs into a cooking vessel on a medium flame burner. I would suggest using a one quart kettle, with a bit of melted butter in the bottom, rather than a frying pan as this will cut down on the mess. The eggs will cook rather quickly so watch that they don't burn. Use a wooden spoon to scrape the sides and pull off the flame while the eggs are still moist. Serve over wheat toast. Reputed to strengthen a son's ailing hair follicles and bolster a husband's waning libido.

Physically, I am troubled with a tight scalp and an abundance of loose joints. A dermatologist has told me that my hair follicles are actually being squeezed off my head. Upon hearing this news, I slid out of the patient's chair, more as a result of loose joints than grief. It sounded like popcorn-- my knees, toes, ankles, fingers, hips and so on-- all my joints cracking under the strain of premature baldness.

I do have a twin. She is female. She is white like me. Because we are fraternal (obviously we are not identical-- I have a penis and she does not), I deplore this question: "When you prick

your finger with a pin does your sister feel your pain and vice versa?" This is stupid. There is nothing paranormal about us. We do not even look similar, she being more Aryan in appearance and demeanor and I being somewhat Semitic in facial features and deportment. For a character to relate to and sympathize with, She knows it would make me very happy if you choose my twin. You can think of Bebe as my lighter shadow (or the alter-protagonist). For a quick transition, here is a story concerning her:

In grade school, I had a very strong vocabulary for being only seven years old. One day on the playground, a big red ball rolled up to my feet. "Gimmee my ball back, you dick," hissed the schoolyard bully. "You feel anger because your primal sense of possession is threatened," I answered him, without picking up the ball. The bully broke my Semitic nose with one swift punch. Articulation of the problem don't ever solve it. My sister then appeared out of nowhere like a true school yard Madonna and broke the bully's kneecaps with several high karate kicks with her pink Keds.

As children, Bebe and I would visit our mother's mother in the cornfields of Iowa and after heavy summer downpours we would sneak away from Grandma's farmhouse and swim in a nearby river that had turned to a dark roiling brown with the rainstorm. It was like swimming in a freshly plowed field. There is no deeper metaphor to be found in the image of the river; it was just a dirty tributary of the Mississippi, filled with chemical fertilizers, mating carp and old tractor tires.

**** 7 ******One of Dwayne's Fits of Lucidity: Mountain Haiku**

There could be such a doleful simplicity to life says my heart, thump-thump, and it tells me, while becalmed during one of my rare fits of lucidity, that this could be my one true desire:

A modest hut is built upon the granite slant of a green mountain. Rough pine boards create the sloping roof for this hut upheld by four corner posts of dark mahogany. Carved on each post are animistic representations of the four elements: earth, sky, fire, water. The wind mixes freely with the air molecules in this hut, which is my simple shelter. There are no walls to hide me from drastic changes in the weather so at night I wrap myself tightly in an alpaca wool blanket. At dawn, I uncover myself and greet the cold blue mist of morning with a grunt of serenity.

My elevated retreat stands firm upon a steep slope. Mammoth trunks of oak, still covered in their bark skin, form a strong unassailable foundation for the rough-hewn cedar floorboards. Peevish mountain squirrels smell the tannin emanating from the trunks and come chattering for acorns but these trees are long dead and have no oak seeds to offer. I throw the animals a bit of my parched rice and ask them to leave me in peace.

The floor of the hut, leveled out above the mountain slope, was once as unfinished as the roof but constant habitation has worn the boards to a cool smoothness. If I lay down and put my cheek close to the old wood, the incense of ancient cedar spirals up my nostrils and

into my brain like an earth-bound message escaping to the heavens. I have stained the floorboards with drops of thick black ink from my pen and spilled green tea from my ceramic pot. My daily rituals are sparse but filled with the quiet solitude of old habits: I kneel on my esparto mat and slowly fill a bowl with tea, sip its raw warmth, splatter a crisp sheet of parchment with the humble spontaneity of poetry:

I'm stranded out on the tombolo of private despair.
The forests of the world are slowly burning.

Then I fold the paper into a boat and toss it down into the diminutive stream that flows under the dead foundation oaks. I expectorate forcefully out of the hut towards the stream and watch, noncom-mittally, to see which will reach the overhanging silver boughs of the downstream maple first: the spit or the poem.

I stole this Li Po fantasy from my sister.

A mentor-professor in my halcyon days of college almost spit on me when I told him that The Humanities were no good and that I saw Media and Marketing as the most viable outlet for the modern creative mind and more suited to my own scattered personality and noble career goals. (What I really wanted was to make sockfulls of money by Madison Avenue's time-honored tradition of mass manipulation of the national psyche.)

"Don't you realize Art and the Love of Language are our only hopes for salvation?" the old guard professor sputtered, his pipe nearly falling out of his mouth and setting his salt and pepper beard on fire. His bottom lip quivered in academic rage and he nearly drooled on my highly polished Florsheim's.

"*Pardonne moi, mon prof,*" I said, "Art disdains me and he always will and the languages have never loved me. On the other hand, concepts-- the hope for a better and brighter tomorrow-- yes, concepts do." Last year I was able to pull in the huge Purina Cat Chow contract for Media Midwest, the marketing firm that I've worked my way up in for these past three years. Perhaps you've seen this commercial:

"Darlink, dis catfuud iss divine!" says a blondish kitty-cat dressed up like Euro-aristocracy. This adfo (advertising information as we say in the business), targeted toward the plethora of upwardly mobile cat owners in Chicago, got me such a hefty bonus that I put a down payment on a condo for my wife and I in Lincoln Park and purchased a professional/industrial food processor for my poor, socially conscious twin Bebe, the positive of my negative. Bebe recently started teaching underprivileged children about the simplicity of life at a Quaker camp in the green mountains of Vermont, after having spent several years traveling out west like a neo-hippie. I thought my sister would appreciate that food processor since she is a gourmet who does interesting things with processed food (food- processed food, not processed fuud).

"You must live every day as if God were dead," Bebe told me as she sautéed a massive amount of processed garlic (three bulbs) in olive oil (virgin) to toss over some *al dente* pasta. We were drinking at a fast tempo from a liter of stringent Italian red wine in celebration of our being reunited. This was last summer after I'd

bailed her out of jail in South Dakota, and she'd stopped by Chicago on the way out East to look for work.

"Bebe," I said, "I'm not in the mood for any of your sweet aethistic mysticism. My spiritual hollow is wide enough already."

"No little brother, you misunderstand me," she replied. I am her little brother because Bebe, our alter-protagonist, now weighs a jolly 30 pounds more than my lean 145. "I live every day with a simple hope that has no divine expectations. The sensual forward flow of nature is the goddess and controlling medium of my mind. I think it always helps to have a mind god of your own to help you through, Dwayne. By the way, your food processor kicks butt."

"What do you want, Bebe? Me to be a sad dream-nut like Rory and tell loopy stories about Media Mistresses and Mind Control?!?" I asked too quickly with a nervous quaver in my voice but my sister misread the defensive tone of my question and thought I was just in one of my peevish and hungry moods. She became quiet and pensive, focusing on the stirring of the garlic which was nearing the point of peak sautéed-garlicness. My wife, Leanne, was in the living room going through a stack of books that Bebe had brought into the apartment, and she broke the taught line of sibling silence with her high nasal voice:

Here it is night: I stay at the Summit Temple.
Here I can touch the stars with my hand.
I dare not speak aloud in the silence
For fear of disturbing the dwellers of Heaven.

"Hey Bebe," she yelled from the living room, "This Chinese stuff, I like it."

"Oriental poetry is like mind Valium," answered Bebe, shifting her solid girth at the stove to face her sister-in-law, "Calms the nerves and leaves the mind free. This stuff is ready."

The three of us sat down at the kitchen table and Leanne lit a Hallmark Santa Claus candle for our centerpiece.

"Invocation by Li Po," Bebe said at the head of the table and smiled, "You two give me your hands to hold. Close your eyes and listen up."

If you were to ask me why I dwell among green mountains,
I should laugh silently; my soul is serene.
The peach blossom follows the moving water;
There is another heaven and earth beyond the world of men.

"Isn't that nice," Bebe said when she finished reciting the poem, and she released our hands, "Makes you want to quite your job and go move to the mountains, doesn't it Dwayne. Dwayne? Hello Dwayne... Earth to Dwayne, wake up!"

"Oh, ignore him Bebe," Leanne sighed, "He's always zoning out nowadays."

** 8 **

“My heart labours with futurity.” --Billy Blake

The Media Mistress wants this televised life of mine to have post-Apocalyptic overtones. She's trying to wedge my visions into the "life in ruins" plot of a sci-fi flick about nuclear winter where everyone walks around grungy, mutated and dissatisfied. She'd have my supporting characters wear stylish (if scruffy) black body suits and leather jack boots as they efficiently utilize neat little mechanical gadgets to tidy up the radioactive mess of their lives. Technological toys are the prominent props here: soup heated up on a timed burner, synthesized music sneaking around in the background and a computerized clock intoning: "Arise Darling Dwayne. Today is sunny and mild. The radiation count is low but sun block 1,500 is recommended." Perhaps She'll create a "man vs. mutated nature" confrontation for me. Blood will be prevalent and a pretty starlet will stand at my side and scream. This could very well may be my atavistic future: a cave-macho epic where clubs and dinosaurs become laser guns and rabid three-headed Dobermans, frothing at the mouth.

Wait a minute! (Or as my Swede grandmother would say to this postmodern pap, "This is goofy.") Would humanity really be loving and leaning upon the Machine with such vapid abandon after everyone had been coated with a plutonium glow? {Clash of wills here. Dwayne-1, Mistress-0.} So, She edits in a big cabalistic rite where every holocaust survivor picks up a random piece of junk, say a digital espresso maker, or a computerized chess board or a

talking dildo and then, *en masse*, they hurl these objects down into the Grand Canyon. She frames the picture so that there is a hopeful, bloody red sunset in the background. All the surviving peoples of the earth stand at the edge of the canyon and symbolically urinate down from a great height upon the broken pile of mechanical luxuries and then go back to their pitiful settlement to beat on old plastic pickle barrels and dance through the night in celebration of the short life and cancerous death to come. [Jump edit. Death juxtaposition.]:

I had a near-death experience yesterday as I pedaled my Italian twelve-speed racer down a busy city street. I was traveling with the flow of traffic, though this makes me nervous because I can't see the cars and trucks until they woosh up behind me and spew out their noxious yellow smoke in passing. (My young wife, though Aryan like my twin sister but a hell of a lot skinnier, was using the family BMW because she had to go across town to continue her ongoing series of dance lessons. She is learning to cut the rug and do the fandango. She foresees a waning of my libido and tries to stave it off with bizarre, exotic acts fueled by her bizarre young energy. For instance, last night I was quietly reading War and Peace on the living room sofa when suddenly she came cartwheeling across the carpet from the bedroom. She was nude, save for feathers scotch-taped to her large breasts. I was highly impressed with her acrobatic performance until she ran up against our tall mahogany bookcase and knocked herself unconscious. "Leanne honey, you okay?" I called from the couch. She mumbled

something affirmative so I went over to her, saw no bleeding, threw a knitted afghan over her nakedness, and went back to the couch to continue reading.)

A silver-blue Fiat nearly clipped me from behind and I turned the chicken and made a move to get up onto the sidewalk. (Bicycles and skateboards are not allowed on Chicago sidewalks by city ordinance, so this was a bold move on my part.) I turned the front wheel of the bike too quickly and hit the six inch high curb entirely straight on. I lurched forward over the handlebars but my toe clips kept me from being thrown off the bike. As I veered out of control onto the sidewalk, I nearly collided with a Chinese-American fellow taking his Doberman for a walk. I came to a stop only after running into a stream-lined USA Today vending machine in front of a MacDonald's restaurant. Thank God it wasn't a heavy duty New York Times dispensing machine or I might have been a goner.

The man laughed, asked if "I awight." His huge, oafish dog barked twice and then pulled its master away from the twisted wreck of my bike. They moved in synchronized rhythm down the sidewalk, heading towards the city park where a one-legged bum waits for them.

I hate having every minor fuck-up in my life witnessed by strangers. Too many of my daily movements are met with derision and little escapes the mocking eye of this over-crowded globe.

[This sad revelation of mine gives Her a troubling transitional glitch:

globe/ the sun never set on the British globe in the Victorian Age/Victorian Age ladies. Resolution of editing difficulties.]:

When Victorian ladies were brought low by the debilitating effects of hysteria-- this affliction may be scorned now but was real enough to the men of medicine that diagnosed it 100 years ago-- pity for the victims seemed to be the rule. On the other hand, I feel there is insufficient compassion where my ailment is concerned. My step-father, Fred, calls my complaint *Protesting Progress* but I prefer to call it *urbania-mania*. The phrase is catchy and has a nice lilt to it. It avoids the angry desperation and bleakness evident in most criticism of the 20th century. (T.S. Eliot comes to mind: I too live in an Unreal City with yellow smoke sliding along the streets, but I'm not about to squeeze tragedy out of apathy here, pull poetic visions out of the smog.)

This *urbania-mania* is caused by being subliminally slapped around by the material bounty of this Age of Media. This term of mine, *urbania-mania*, is a swift diagnosis of my current collision (collusion?) with sanity. I will only infrequently admit to myself that the random nature of existence is varnished over by modern conveniences in merely the most superficial of ways.

We have parceled out for us, in a continuous numbing stream, little packages of convenience. Slices of cheese fuud come individually wrapped in plastic so there is no longer the danger of scraping your knuckles with a cheese slicer. Household refuse is compacted into a dense cube that still smells like ka-ka but is much easier to handle. Nude pictorials of women are hermetically

sealed so that they can't be fingered up before purchase. Social debates concerning these pictorials are boxed into categories called Art, Pornography, Erotica and Feminism. [She allows my colorful rant here to add intellectual depth to Her video voodoo.]

There are many different mediums used to dole out such conveniences but a full listing here would niggle and belabor the point because I do love convenience as much as I love my family, my cookbooks, and my genitals.

I embrace this life graciously given to me by the modern age. [She flashbacks to a summer long ago.] When I was not quite yet a teenager, I swam in a muddy river that smelled of chemical fertilizers, rotting tractor tires and mating fulsome carp. The water, as it cooled my body on a hot day in July, also brought about an infection of the ears and a double case of pneumonia in the lungs. I needed small plastic tubes to drain my ears and was put on antibiotics for three weeks to clear the phlegm from my throat and lungs. I could breathe no better than an asthmatic coal miner and, as I gasped for air, my mother would rock me to sleep, my long dangling legs of a pre-teen nearly brushing the floor.

This last paragraph is suitable as a televised testimonial to the glory of modern medicine. John Huston, the gravely-voiced Hollywood director, could play the role of my doctor convincingly but he died of lung cancer several years ago. He might have segued into the state of my teeth, which are a miracle of orthodontia, or remark upon my eyes, which are of different colors. One eye is brown and the other appears to be aqua-green due to the fact that

when I ordered contact lenses (to hide my acute myopia), a heinous clerical error occurred at the local optometrist's. I ended up wearing a blue contact on my left eye that in fact belonged to a certain housewife down the street. Her name is Lucy. Once a month my left eye gets cramps and is temperamental. On my right eye floats the grey contact that was always meant to be mine. It shows off rather well the mahogany aspects of my retina. If you look deep into my eyes all you will see are the contacts floating limpidly on the surface of my corneas.

And so, happily enough, I'm a product of the present. I really don't mind being cajoled and manipulated by the media. It's rather flattering to get so much of their attention and I really have nothing to complain about. In living 25 years on this blue earth, I've never gone hungry or been tortured physically.

I really have nothing to complain about.

My sister's cat could not say the same while it was alive.

My step-father used to smear tuna oil on the family TV screen, wait for a Purina Cat Chow commercial and then release Bebe's cat from his clutches. The cat would attack the screen hungrily, but the minute her tongue touched the screen, she would be thrown back by the static electric shock. My step-father hoped to recreate the exciting scientific reactions of Pavlov's dog but the cat eventually puked on Fred's new leather loafers in retaliation. What this remembrance of a now dead cat says to me is that, no matter how tasty and visceral the television medium seemed to be, the cat would never have been satisfied. I will never be satisfied.

No matter how many gyrating female torsos, exploding amplifiers and flashing chrome-coated motorcycles flash upon the screen in the hottest new MTV music video, my sensual field will still be bereft. I can't taste the sweat of those dancing thighs, smell the acrid sting of a smoking amp, feel the burning rubber of a Harley Davidson wheel before I am run over in the street. Bebe's cat was run over by a speedy moped, a Honda. Time now for a Wild Kingdom break:

Bebe's Dead Cat Mouse Hunt: She was all-black and had that wonderful feline sexual sleekness. She would slink out into the tall grass behind the house with every intention of bringing home prey. She would crouch silent and low in the swaying wild oats and occasionally flick her tail whip-like to scatter the horseflies from her back. To initiate the capture she would explode with the graceful, slow-motion speed of an African cheetah and within moments a mouse would be quivering alive in her mouth. She would bring it to the front porch and play with the small frightened creature until one of us acknowledged her hunting prowess with a gentle pat on her back. Then she'd bite its head off.

A backward African family in a mud hut was once cajoled by an ambitious sociologist to watch a video montage of gameshows, sitcoms, MTV clips, and beer commercials on her portable, battery-operated VCR-TV unit. After a few minutes the family began to cry out in confusion and fright. The gods had gone crazy and were vomiting up their most random nightmares to punish these poor, unassuming savages. The sociologist yawned and noted down their

reactions with a detached, academic boredom. She'd seen this video before.

** 9 **

Dwayne's Passion Tripartite: Lust, Booze, and Death

“What a bizarre act of faith,” my wife said, finally unclasping her bra after resisting my horny wheedles for sex all yesterday evening.

“Leanne, if you don’t feel up to copulation tonight, then I’ll just go into the bathroom and masturbate,” I assured her, getting up from the bed where I had been admiring the colorful graphics which randomly spice up and make coherent each issue of USA TODAY. (The New York Times has a lot to learn from these guys, I thought.) During a fit of lucidity several weeks ago, I suddenly realized that I had jacked enough sperm down bathroom sinks to birth a nation.

“Fuck... fuck you!” Leanne hissed at me.

My wife was facing away from me as she stripped but, upon cursing me, she whipped around so suddenly that the bra in her hand lashed me across the face and its metal clasp cut into my cheek and drew blood.

“Fuck-fuck me? No!” I replied, furious that she felt my agreeable offer for lovemaking was made out of ennui rather than a concern for the fresh purple bruise on her forehead (the result of forehead meeting mahogany straight on), “Fuck-fuck you honey!”

“This isn’t goddamn Mother Goose, Dwayne!” my wife hissed again with a furious amount of control in her voice, her blue eyes narrowed to slits. Recently she has become too adept at making unpleasant faces. “Just you shut the fuck up!”

Blood letting (aside from the mundane act of butchering farm animals at the rate of millions of cows, chickens, and hogs per day) is an emotionally-rendered act deeply connected to the human psyche. The saga of *homo sapien* contains a prodigious procession of cultures that held a sacrosanct belief in the controlled draining of blood. Many societies believed that releasing vital bodily fluids exorcised migraine demons, harnessed hysteria, and brought down fevers. Sometimes I wish I could unscrew the pinkie from my left hand and let the blood flow unabated unto the earth until my passion ebbed to a more manageable level. Then I'd screw my pinkie back on and put an end to my concurrent act of libation and blood lobotomy.

Any vital notions concerning the romantic possibilities of passion are made mundane if one considers the fact that desire too often pours out of a human body as crudely and uncontrollably as urine pumped from bladders overloaded with alcohol. I and my childhood friend of summer, Joe Feather, used to pee incredibly forceful arcs over and into a sorry tributary of the Mississippi; we balanced ourselves, wobbly and serious with the task at hand, atop the cross beams of a rusted-out railway bridge. We would both be hopelessly overcome by the power of drinking three quarts of homemade wine (Welch's grape juice and Brewer's yeast) and the realities of cause and effect, gravity and the bladder, were forgotten in the mystery of the pee powerful moment. Was it possible that the muddy, polluted waters below were traveling up our thin piss trails into our insensate peckers? Good God! If the

river water got into our prostates, we'd be swift ugly goners for sure!

As children, Bebe and I spent nearly every summer vacation at Grandma Swedenborg's farm a few miles outside of the little town of Blue Earth in southern Iowa. When I turned thirteen, Grandma Swede told me I was old enough to work, by golly, and that she'd pay me and Joe \$1.50 an hour if we'd get off our tushes and helped her bail hay and such. She was a hard, lumpy sixty-five year old woman at the time and had been keeping 50 acres of the original 200 acre farm going for ten years since her husband, Dwayne Swedenborg, had died. Joe's father, Mack Feather, was usually Grandma's farmhand when he felt up to it. Mack was supposedly 64th part Blackfoot Indian which made him ineligible for government support but not exempt from Native American angst and alcoholism.

For the next seven summers until I graduated from Purdue, I baled hay, slopped hogs, milked cows, and pulled stones out of muddy fields. Joe and his father, country males as hard and as dispassionate as the granite stones in the field, would mock my soft hands and weak shins but, because I gave them whiskey (stolen from my step-father's wet bar) and told them all the raw jokes I learned on the streets of Chicago, they were never too cruel to me. Bebe was made commander of the chickens at thirteen and fed the feathered bawkers, took their eggs, and plucked them clean after decapitating them. Joe, for all his heroic 128th part Indian blood, would run away and hide behind the hay barn until Bebe finished killing the chickens. "I'm gonna go have a smoke," he'd say and

then run away. "As long as I kill them quick, their spirit won't have time to get afraid," my sister would say, "And then we can eat them without guilt."

Two weeks ago my mother called me on the phone. Four years past, Grandma Swede had died and Mom had finally convinced her husband to move his insurance business down to Blue Earth-- "State Farm is just as profitable as City Crime," she told him-- so she could take over the family farm.

"Joe Feather jumped off a railway bridge last night and they can't find his body," she told me and then there was silence on the line as she waited for my reaction. I had none because my Mistress suddenly and inexplicably would give me none.

Joe flew out into the dark pre-morning air and quickly cut open the surface of the river with the violent slice his body. Around his left ankle was tied a knotted length of bailing twine which was attached to the railroad tracks above. The old twine had withstood the shock of free fall but Joe didn't. Three days later he washed up on a large, oily sand bar miles down river. His left cowboy boot, still attached to the end of his ad hoc safety line, dangled less than a foot above the surface of the water: the shoe swayed in a cool autumn breeze. There was a shot of whiskey left in the clear glass bottle on the bridge and I'd like to think that last shot was left for me to drink but I hadn't seen Joe in several years so why should I hope to be included in any of his final symbolic acts? "There's a Tear in My Beer" was Joe's favorite song, though this really doesn't say much about his sentimental disposition.

[The Media Mistress suddenly attempts a clever juxtaposition here. She's about to do a jarring insert edit: documentary footage of sinewy natives enacting rites of passage, jumping out of trees, jungle vines tied to their ankles. Watch the orgasmic rush of speeding toward the ground, experience the prophylactic relief of being yanked up safely, less than a foot away from the messy death of hitting the earth face first. There is always the chance the vines will snap.]

{*Clash of wills again.* Joe's just one more sad departure from this tired spinning of the globe. Don't try to create a Hallmark drama out of my friend's death, Mistress. Stupid with booze, Joe was rehashing the childhood games of our youth, restlessness, and boredom: playing chicken with oncoming trains, jumping like squirrels from one impossibly tall oak tree to another, throwing rocks at pickup trucks flashing by dangerously in the night. *Her vision of reality is at odds with my own. "Despair is the medium of everything, it is the medium of meaning," sayeth the Mistress.* But now I don't want this meaningful despair. I wish to return to the simple unquestioned randomness that has no creator, no author but the sensual forward movement of time itself. As Bebe has always tried to teach me: accept the inevitable disorder of life, accept pathos as your ethos... Dwayne-2, Mistress-0.)

[In spite, She fastforwards past my sad loss of virginity to a high school cheerleader. I could relish the smooth, lean distance of those teenage thighs again but She teasingly edits with such furious speed that I only have time to hear the high-pitched giggle of the

lithe girl who loved sex for sex for sex. That's all She allows me to watch of such this painfully transient vision. The Mistress decides instead to make me linger on memories of my cousin. My dead, beautiful, buried beneath the ground cousin, the one and only child of Doctor Uncle Ron.]

I was nine, she was eleven and we played "kissing cousins" in our grandmother's dank basement in Iowa. I tried competing with Joe for the favors of my mother's niece one hot July afternoon and Bebe got mad and ran outside to throw rocks at the chickens. Dark and lively Franny used the services of a plywood Ouija board to magically decide whether I or Joe could kiss her next. After getting the no answer five times running, I threatened to steal a kiss from Franny anyway so she threw the Ouija board at me and ran off to hide with Joe behind the chicken coop. After the wound healed, I was left with a rakish scar on my forehead right above my left eyebrow. Thank you dear Franny-- that scar lead to so many fruitful lies told in the throes of Friday night lust for uncommon, independent college women: "Yes, it's a wound I received during a knife fight in on the Southside... Yes, this angry-red slash is the cruel souvenir of a childhood tussle with a rabid Doberman... Yes, yes, come home with dashing, heroic me and let's have wild safe sex til dawn."

Two days after reaching sweet sixteen, our society's current legal age of consent, Franny was run down by a speedy Fiat, driven by a tenured sociologist at the University of Purdue who was under the control of whiskey and reds. The sociologist had just come back

from Africa and she was out of touch with American roadside etiquette. I imagine that the interior of her car that day to be filled with the nauseating miasma of the cheap perfume ugly women always seem to favor. Franny's coffin also reeked of this cheap perfume-- perhaps morticians favor ugly women. But Franny wasn't cheap and she should never be called ugly: she was a beautiful dead virgin.

After Joe Feather's funeral last week, I drank cheap red-white- and-blue American beer with my mother and step-father out on the porch of the old Swedenborg farmhouse. It was the first time I'd had beers with them since the Valiant confrontation back in high school.

"Joe was a fine damn fellow," my step-father mumbled. He tends to cover his mouth with his hand when he is nervous, like a woman or a pensive Freudian psychologist.

"He surely was pious," my mother said. I think she was referring to Joe's active participation in my her Baptist church choir, not to his moral state of being. My mother's church is not my step-father's church.

"When I die there will only be darkness," my step-father might have said, but he didn't. Atheists seem to sense when to be silent.

My step-father was far from silent when I brought home the family's Plymouth Valiant one night and parked it out front at the curb on Addison Street with a screech of wet brakes. Such an amazing sight, that car. Mother, Step-Father and I stood around the

dripping car, its sides covered in reeds, muck and river willow branches. Bebe just stood on the apartment stoop, hunched over with laughter.

"What in hell is this?" our step-father quietly asked, sploshing beer on my new cowboy boots as he lurched towards me.

"Fred... No lie here. I was making it in the back seat off the canal road out behind the industrial park and the parking brake disengaged. The car went down the bank into the canal. Dad, I was drinking, admitted, but we were practicing safe sex and she was the designated driver because you know cheerleaders don't like to drink anyway." I somehow thought that embellished truths would be better than outright lies.

Fred lurched even closer to me and suddenly my alcohol-fuzzed 19 year old brain realized that he was subliminally giving me permission to take part in a modern father-son moment. He wasn't mad, he was touched by empathy! Step-father and son began the awkward movement of roughly hugging one another; confusion during this rare act of affection caused them to bump noses rather severely. Bloody noses and laughing men was the result.

"Don't know why I try," said my mother. She threw the rest of her beer at the Valiant, sitting on the curb and ignoring the all too common scene of drunk males hugging with bravado on a Chicago city street. Unfortunately for my mother, my step-father's libido is waning (unlike the immortal aesthetic sex drive of certain poets in the American literary canon). Bebe, who was much thinner then, had stopped laughing because she wasn't getting enough

oxygen and could only wheeze. "You guys are caught in every bad Rock Hudson movie ever made," she wheezed.

I have read that, in addition to being a fine doctor, William Carlos Williams was also a somewhat faithful husband. His wife once asked him, when he was sixty-five, if he really wanted to make love with every single woman he met. After several minutes of grave thought, W. C. answered, "Yes. I do."

If I was able to take a mental photograph of every woman I've ever wanted to make love to in real life (including the housewife Lucy down the street but excluding all the bimbo models I could only screw in the reality of my dream state), there would be no paucity of passion in these loins. My leather-bound volume of carnal snapshots would stimulate my psyche late into the night and I would be able to recreate sad old love affairs that never happened and place them under the heroic 60 watt illumination of lusty English Restoration love poetry. Whoa! The all-out bravado of that last sentence has made me awfully thirsty. Time now for a mixed drink:

William Carlos Williams' Red Hot Margarita Mix: Of course it's not possible to get that icy slush they use at bowling alley bars and Tasti Freezes and it's not a good idea to use salt in these days of high blood pressure. But the gist of the drink: three shots of light octane tequila, ten fresh strawberries, and about 1/8 teaspoon of both ground ginger and cinnamon. You can settle for ice cubes from the freezer and mix all the ingredients together in a blender (or a professional food processor if you have one). This is not too fruity a

*drink, just merely potent enough to either cause or cure impotency-
- it all depends on the attitude and willingness of the loins at stake.*

The Restoration rakes and dandies wrote some wonderfully tender poems about "dying in myne ladyes arms." This is a most ingenuous metaphor to link death and orgasm in one clean, simple line. (Such is the innovative backlash to Cromwellian Puritanism.) Though my young wife is a Puritan like my mother, last night she forgave my blasé satisfaction in onanistic bathroom sex. Leanne put a bandage over my bleeding, coppery-smelling cheek and then we died in each other's arms. Fade out on *coitus quietus* on the living room rug.

**** 10 ****

**The Media Mistress Reviews the Progress
of the Word Video and
Drew Relays a Message from Benedetta**

Timely editorial intrusion on pornography: frenzied hotness, sadness, primal adrenaline, & stupidity. Sex for the sake of sex (naughty sex) is compelling, repelling, and very expensive for our lonely, horny American males. With talking dirty over the phone costing up to \$4.95 a minute, what will the new rates be for watching someone masturbate via our latest modern miracle of technology-- the video-phone? And they all waited with wheezing breaths for the day when The Fuck Channel was finally offered by the local cable company...

So the common complaint of tenderhearts like Dwayne and Drew is that Life has been dehumanized by the new Urban Order: is it any wonder they consider raw sex in the 20th century to be the one true act of social/religious communion left for them? And being closet porn hounds, they like to publically declare that Modern Reason has de-mystified Existence into a series of logical outcomes: should there be any wonder why they cling so desperately to the ecstatic death throes of the good cum?

I do hope I haven't embarrassed you, Drew, being so forthright about your predilections and unabashedly linking you up to our fictitious protagonist, Dwayne.

Actually, I'm glad you've gotten all this sexual repression and gender dislocation out into the air, Mistress. As my Benedetta

pointed out just the other day, there is way too much penis talk in the first half of this narrative, anyway. Though she commends you on your editing job, she isn't too happy with what I've written so far: "Lover, you're fixated way too much on the male antics of humpty-dumpty. I'd really like to see more of my sisters in this text, you phallocentric slug."

Thanks for that message, Drew. Benedetta's right, of course, and I will attempt to edit in more plurality of voices in the second half of this word video. As for your own fascination for sex, I think it can be explained in part because of your biases as a man of letters. You remind me of an English prof I had as an undergraduate at NYU. He was a Brahman academic who had once stolen one of Faulkner's golf balls from the Mississippi Bard's home in Oxford. Dick (ironic name-cum-Freud) told our class in a most serious manner that "sex should be considered the predominate mega-motif of twentieth century fiction." I considered this statement with the appropriate amount of awe due both to the logic of that declaration and the tenured man who made it but, after the initial intellectual buzz wore off, I realized that lobotomies and bowel movements might also be considered strong contemporary components of fictive mega-motifs. This led me down the long and troubling road of academic disenchantment and I ended up switching majors from English to film where instead of just talking bullshit, I could visually create it!

As is, my romantic disposition always led me to create alter-realities in my mind. For instance, as a freshmen so recently

moved away from home, I constantly dreamt that love letters were being slid under my door in the dead of night. Without my glasses on, the fuzzy shaft of light under my dorm room door always seemed to announce the glowing aura of yet another love letter sent. I would leap from my bed, frantically whip open the door (with an attempt at cool reserve, nonetheless) and find the hallway to be empty: nothing, no one there. All I ever ended up getting was my roommate angry at me for waking her up: "Girl, you crazy! Ain't no boy gonna sneak over to our room in the dead of night deliverin' no love letters!"

But then, my notions on the capabilities of men where no more unrealistic than the male perceptions of womanhood. The Media (the Man Monolith?) tells Man what Woman is, and sometimes (all the time?) they believe it. It's a mixed medium world, a multi-message society and these poor boys' visions of Modern Womanhood become a distressing hodge-podge of lust, respect, confusion, and denial. If only they would all calmly let their hearts do the pumping of blood to their brains to do the thinking of their loins to let them know what is real and true in love--

{Drew coughs loudly, signally his dis-ease as the Media Mistress gets carried away by her own verbosity, forgetting that She is the editor and he is the writer, never the twain should meet. He jumps right in and adds his own two cents worth, and no more.}

*And my slim member to accept that one day it will die along
with the rest of me and then who will care what indiscretions my
pecker led me on to but all those I may have hurt along the way...*

**** 11 ******Plurality #1: Miriam Swedenborg's Birthday Book***November 22, 1956*

Dear Diary, Today was my 8th birthday. I got two new dresses, some Fanny Farmer candie and Ronnie gave me a slingshot which made Mom mad at him because he is a teen ager and should know better. Oh and I got you Diary. After cake and icecream we went out to the pasture and it was so cold the cow splats were steeming. Mack Feather showed up but I didn't let on I like him. He said wach this and lit one with the lighter he stoll from his dad. It burned! Smelled bad to. We went back in after football when it got dark. Mom had hot chocolate ready for us. Dad said you want a shot of whisky in that? Mom laughed and said not a chance even if shes the birthday girl. My birthday wish before I go to sleep is that it snows tomorrow and we won't have school. That happened last year right before Thanksgiving so we got more days off. Bye Diary.

November 22, 1964

Dear Diary. I counted up all the entries I've writtn since 56 when I got you and it only totals 79 entries. I hardly ever write to you except on birthdays, Christmas, and snowdays. I never ever even pick you up in the summer. Too busy or lazy I guess. This is one of the years were Thanksgiving and my birthday are on the same day. I usually don't like this because I have to open my gifts in front of all the relatives I only see maybe once or twice a year but this year my cousin Violet from Chicago came down and we talked about just everything. She told me what it's like going out dancing with boys, how shes going to have her own apartment when she gets out of high school next year, how she got to see the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show. I wish we had a television set but Dad said they are a waste of money and time. I think George is the cutest and he looks a little like Mack Feather to me. It snowed this morning but then melted by dinner and Uncle Bert and Ronnie, who came home from Iowa State, had a snow ball fight in their shirt sleeves! Dad's still mad at him cause he suspects he won't come back to farm when he graduates. Mom found another of my self improvement notes that I had put on my bedroom mirror and she edited it. I just hate it

when she gets nosy and is always at me. She says if I can't even spell my resolutions to myself correctly I'll never get hired as a secretary. "Young lady, clarity counts, by gosh, even in personal letters to oneself!" Geesh, that's what I get for having a mother who used to teach English in Debuque. Bye Diary.

P.S. I hope Mom doesn't try to wake me up tomorrow to go to church. The minister is so boring and the choir always sings out of tune. Mack says the Baptists are much more fun and sing and shout. Mabe I'll pretend I'm sick.

November 22, 1967

Diary, it's official. I've decided to quit the Lutheran church and joined the Holy Roller Baptists. Mom probably wouldn't care as long as I don't become a Catholic but I'm sure Dad would scream at me over the phone if he found out. Lucy, who works at the desk next to me said I should try the Baptists because they're friendlier and aren't so stodgy. That first service I went to was like being at a theater with people yelling Amen! at the minister (or they say preacher). There were even some black people there tho Lucy says the Baptists usually segregate themselves. I'm glad I got hired at the United Press International newspaper office because I got to meet Lucy, become a Baptist and the pay is alot better than what I made working for the school board back at Blue Earth. I'd been in Chicago almost a month and couldn't find anything and Ronnie couldn't give me anymore since he's pretty poor as a medical student anyway tho he took me out to dinner plenty of times. I couldn't call home, either, cause Dad would have called me the prodigal daughter for sure. Then I got hired at this newspaper office and I already met this great guy there. He's almost ten years older than me but a real gentleman and he's been all over the world. He even reported wars in Africa. His name is Rory, which is different, and he said he'd take me out to dinner tomorrow when he found out it was my birthday and I said yes! Violet said to do it, she'd wait up to hear all about it when I get back to the apartment. Here we go Diary!

November 22, 1968

Another Thanksgiving birthday. I finally feel real hungry tho I haven't for these past few days. I haven't eaten normally for months now and the only

satisfying hunger that came when I was pregnant with Bebe and Dwayne was when I'd hide in the closet and eat chocolate. It always seemed to deepen the sensual experience for me as if I was somehow nourishing my babies and me at the same time. I wish I could go home for Mom's huge turkey dinner but Dad would make a scene. He says he still loves me but won't allow me in the house. Most likely he'd tried to kill Rory. At least Mom showed up for the wedding and Rory's odd mother who talked nonstop in a funny southern accent, much thicker than Rory's. Ronnie was the best man and Violet my lady in waiting or whatever you call it. We got married at her apartment by Preacher Smugens from the Church of the Fire and the Lamb. I suppose he couldn't tell how far gone I was with my dress or I'm sure he wouldn't have married this pregnant teenager! Rory's been very good to me and still romantic and in my fifth month said he liked how my vapid hands flitted to and fro in front of my laden breasts, like humming birds before a pair of nectar filled flowers. The funny things he comes up with. I really can't believe him getting drunk just a week before I was due and passing out and I having to get Mrs. Bukowski down the hall to help me get him out of the cast-iron bathtub and into the bed. (She didn't raise any fuss so I think Catholics are more forgiving of sin. Somehow their confession gets rid of the responsibility for guilt.) I'm sure he did it because of the stress of marriage and getting fired from UPI so close to me going to the hospital. Last year who would have thought I'd have twins born just a few days before my 20th birthday. Beautiful babies, both a boy and a girl, even if attached at the knees though I'll love them even more and Ronnie tells me once their bone structure solidifies they can be separated with little trouble. I wish Rory would show up soon and take me home. Hospitals are too creepy and clean smelling to stay in for long even if my cesarean hasn't healed yet. Maybe Violet will bring over some turkey to the apartment cause I know Rory can't cook. I'm so hungry I

November 22, 1974

As a wife I couldn't imagine having to live up to the mythic proportions (expectations?) of having a husband who completely disappeared. I couldn't. Rory was truly a goddamn fool but I couldn't help but love him with his dashing funniness and gentle ways (when he wasn't stoned). I was

young and he was experienced and now I feel so old and he's gone. I left UPI when the kids were born and after he left I ending up working at Fred's insurance office because Violet dated his younger brother and put in a good word for me. Fred was never rude and gave me raises because I worked hard and he knew I had kids at home which made him soft, a widower with no children. Even tho he was older that Rory the inevitable Will You Marry Me? came after about a year as his receptionist and I finally saying yes because Fred seemed alright and kind in his own way too, very consistent and he never cried when he got drunk so yes I married him. And not to be crass, that solved the money trouble with Rory gone. It gave me a solid base to cope with Dad just having died, and the operation to seperate Bebe and Dwayne still not all paid for. Why Rory decided to get on that film kick and buy so much movie camera equipment right before he disappeared, I'll never know. And the pawning of it didn't help much. Fred's so sensible having us stay at the Addison apartment to save money and already having the kids save up their money earned from odd jobs he has them do though Bebe is always spending hers on candy or giving it to the homeless. Dwayne steals it, she says. I guess a woman with kids doesn't have time for birthdays and it looks like they've all forgotten it anyway. Who cares! I shouldn't, but I do.

November 22, 1986

I haven't written in here for over ten years. I completely forgot about this diary with it stuck at the back of the sock drawer where I could conveniently forget it. Where has time gone? I started writing thirty years ago a tomboy in cornland Iowa and now I'm 38 and the kids are gone and Fred's loosing his hair. Dwayne will go far at Purdue, I think. So serious at times and never letting too much emotion show like the time he got lost in that snowstorm in Wisconsin and his Boyscout troop leader brought him home all frost bitten and he wouldn't even let me hug him. Bebe is always jolly but Dwayne with that pensive, pained look on his face like his father used to get. But that scares me when I think about the similarities between those two. This is another Thanksgiving birthday which works out for Dwayne coming home on break. Dwayne seems to like being away but now Bebe has threatened to run away from Chicago if

she can't go to college too. Fred asked her to be reasonable since her grades weren't good enough for scholarship and that if she finished out the year working at his office he'd send her to some good community college in town. She's got stronger dreams than I had at that age and refuses to play it safe like Dwayne. She even threatens to go down and visit Rory's mother though I doubt she will, Mimi being the painful link to a failed father. What I want, this is corny I'll admit, for my birthday is my children's happiness. Or maybe a minimum of unhappiness for them. Question: does that leave any room open for my own happiness?

November 22, 1989

I went to church this morning. I hadn't been in years though I made the kids go to the American Baptist Sunday school on Montrose right through high school tho Bebe often hid in the basement instead. I suppose this makes me a ex-Lutheran, failed Baptist hypocrite though I could use a little God right now so I ended up entering a store front Unitarian church on Pulaski to listen to a woman preacher tell a white collar crowd to thank the Earth Goddess for the Autumnal Harvest. I left before the service was over pretty well shocked. I used to be so high on the Lord and it's pretty disturbing to consider that the higher power might be a Lordess or even an asexual entity like Liberace. Dad's probably rolling over in his grave right now but he's got Mom to keep him company now. I miss her so much. She was always strong and reserved but love came through in the little things she used to do like putting the hot water bottles at the foot of my bed or combing my hair before the Blue Earth spelling bees. She's been gone for almost two months now and yet I expect her to walk out to the drive in her calico apron, flour on her hands, when I go home next week. Why am I going home to Iowa. I'm going home because I miss the open fields and Abraham Lincoln told me to leave Chicago. Rather it was the dream I had where I wandered the streets of Chicago in a dangerous greyness and looking up I saw a huge apartment building in the shape of Lincoln's noble head. His eyes were windows and in one a man committed suicide by hanging and in the other a woman was being raped by a masked man. Out of Lincoln's nose flowed blood and he suddenly spoke out: "Crack! Lady, five dollars for crack!" I woke up screaming and hitting at Fred until he

held me and quieted me down. "No more 5 O'Clock News for you," he said after I told him the dream. It was my country soul telling me I should move back to Blue Earth. Mom's gone, my need for escape has evaporated and that little town seems to be an alright place now. Mack called the next day and said that we should sell the farm soon while the fall profits were high and before winter came. "Weird thing happened down the road yesterday," Mack added, "That young Jorgenson kid put a penny on the track of the railroad bridge over the river and the penny shot into the air like a bullet when the morning train passed over. It impaled him right in the forehead, it did. Never knew what hit him!" I suddenly realized that you could never know when something like that might happen to yourself so act *now*. With a little wheedling Fred and I are headed for the farm life tomorrow. Wish me luck, Diary. We're going home.

November 22, 1992

It was unseasonably warm today, at least 65 by noon. Tomorrow may seem more like Easter than Thanksgiving so the drive to Chicago shouldn't be bad. This morning I was watching Mack buck barley in the barn and the sun was coming warm and fuzzy in through the wall slats. Breathing in the hay dust I suddenly remembered what Dad used to say, "I distrust summer cuz it always smells of what I'm not getting." Why did he always try to deny over and over that life could be truly good on earth? "Heaven's my one true reward... it can be yours too if you repent," he had whispered in my ear after the stroke and then he squeezed my hand. Ronnie cried in the corner of the hospital room and Mom was too stoic for her own good sitting on the other side of the bed. He died in the night and I called Rory up in the morning to see how the kids were doing. He'd forgotten to change their knee bandages and was overly apologetic and the placating tone of his voice made me finally break down and cry. There was silence on his end of the line and I suppose he had enough pain of his own to deal with and no empathy for my own. Who can ever understand the hurt another heart can hold. Mack seems to be holding up well. He didn't cry at Joe's funeral while Dwayne bawled into a handkerchief for quite some time. It's odd to remember how I loved him as a girl but then he became too rough, a lean and hard boy who never intended to go anywhere or do

anything. Well, I've gone and done only a small bit of what I intended and here I am back in Blue Earth again. Mack never left and never wanted to so I guess he's ahead on that count, bad lungs and liver to boot. What would make a boy kill himself before he's even had a chance to have his dreams fail? Much of what we do day to day is just a matter of living here on earth so why not stick around to find out what happens next. I remember how Mom always took Dad down a notch or two when he got too tanked up with visions of the Lord's Kingdom to come: "The Spirit of the Lord bloweth down here on earth too ya know, Dwayne." Fred was on business in Louisville last week and he actually got up the nerve to go into a Victoria's Secret and buy me a black camisole for my birthday. Yes, I guess none of us can know what the other heart may hold! You're full now diary, not a page left to ramble on.

Is my future worth a whole nother birthday book?

**** 12 ****

Plurality #2: Mimi O'Coole, Womanist

To puke like a Christian you have to drink like a man said Grand-daddy Dermot O'Coole sipping his lemonade 'n whiskeys under the big ol' magnolia out behind the manor back when we was visiting Macon before they died he really being the only man I ever knew who could vomit like a gentleman his ways always a careful balance of common-sense and old world custom like the time he said he knew he must kill the Yankees for the Confederacy required it of him but damned if he'd do it like whoppin' heads offa chickens in the barnyard he being famed for having found an Irish type Northern lad dead on the battle-field when the officers weren't looking split open the skull to get some of the grey matter from the brain then filled his bullets with the mind of the enemy return their souls to thee he'd cry out firing the rifle and Pogue Mahone! You Yanks In Blue Kiss My Ass! of course coming out of the war with nary a scratch 'cept his left pinkie shot off by a whiz-zing musket ball his or theirs he never knew but he could be so funny with that hand how we'd play hide and seek behind all the huge stone gryphons out on the cattle field he'd carved them in the barn winter evenings and Sundays not being religious no more after both his son (my daddy) and wife was killed in a street car mishap in Atlanta my mother never quite right after that so I growing up with joy and freedom and my grand-daddy pretending to stick his hand into one of those terrible teathy gargoye grins pulls his hand out and screams Look Girl! it done took my pinky away me giggling

silly Dermot you ain't got no pinky on that hand anyhow and he'd wink at me say you a real sly girl I reckon that it's true what them Galic tales say 'bout the fairies coming at night to steal the human babies leavin' cantankerous fairy childs in their place now I see it Mimi you're a fairie but I like you just the same.

In my dream last night I fell down upon the dusty road outside the gates of the womancity pearl and pink passion fruit gates and sounds of twanging harps my skin taught smooth breasts full I was young again but they wouldn't let me in to the womancity of my dreams cuz of the mens chained to my ankles ain't true never happened Take Me In Womancity! I Got Womanacity! all those many men been inside me were as scared as I only different the first time it was that professor at Tulane who loved me intentionally gave me Rory by accident then ran off to the rainforest years later trying to bring a brown little pygmy out of the forest to be his wife Anthropologist Does More Than Study The Natives, He Marries Them said the headlines alongside photos of mushroom clouds and Ike giving the thumbs up which wasn't fair he was a quiet man not like Bishop who'd sign his love (lust) letters to me-- Yrs, SME-- Simply Man Enough yes an overwhelming masculinist who gave the warm touch one night and the backhand the very next day and Lemare who'd been to Europe before the war and used to sing atonal German cabaret songs when he took his morning shower "Stop all the troops here's Mother Courage!" but I was older by then already 35 and a teenage son he still young

radical in his flesh & spirits that had survived the war whole he'd sing even when we'd leave Atlanta to camp in the Smokies and he'd sing the hawks off the mountains and the raindrops down out of the sky though once I got my revenge filling his camp pillow with poison ivy puffing his eyes closed though they all were never outright poison that first one just a hard-up professor never having had a woman in a class before wanting to get anthropological in bed let my peter be your *axis mundi* he said as if my vagina somehow marked the dividing line between god and man, woman being for him the earthly go-between.

My womona may be the orifice of hope for the men yet for us it's more the pink musky mediator between the womb and the outer world mediation where the true hope is at I knowing that the holistic way being the only way first birthing in a dolphin pool in the states my client so tired yet she was happier the bottlenoses nuzzling the newborn boy chirping out welcomes to the outer world which Rory never got and no daddy so he always a difficult child getting his head stuck between the bars of the front porch railing me trying to Crisco him out of the situation he screaming flinging boogers at me Ma! Ma! I wanna stay like this but him gone for years now never forgiving me the move to Chicago when he was in high school never right after coming back from Africa now Miriam not ever letting me see the children my own grandchildren after the separation was made legal she acting like I don't exist no more though I suppose she done right by them getting them a new daddy

and carrying on though I miss them Bebe writing just once years ago and Dwayne never ever forget me making them sing all the cartoon songs they knew so we wouldn't be shot by the hunters having wanted to find a great blue heron near Joliet but forgetting about deer season in the Midwest so adorable after being separated they'd still cling on to each other loved my sweet potato biscuits so much more Mimi bake us smore please and then I didn't see them no more.

Last night after sunset in the sky over Jacksonville, a crescent moon rose to a level with one of the planets Mars maybe and with such signs can't help think of dying now turning seventy-five Florida too jammed pack with holistic specialists trying to turn profits off massages crystals Indian flutes never caring truly for peace and goodness just the newest fad or greed though I've been labeled such myself kooky dolphin woman holistic (not swedish) massage lady pacifist unwed mother whose lacking family friends values all I hoping is for peace so my grandkids might live happier than me but I ain't got regrets no one to bury me like Dermot doing to Grandma O'Coole's tombstone

Katherine Fletcher O'Coole

1852 \$\$\$ 1919

Buried under the Almighty Dollar

which comes from marrying a rich northern heiress daughter of a carpetbagger never forgiving the conjugal ties of money he cried out at the burial-- May these engraved letters be read upon the granite till all the tombstones fall flat upon the ground, blown

hence by the All-Leveling Death of Judgment! and his words still
reading upon my mind, etched there by the sad and wonderful
tiring flow of my life.

**** 13 ******Plurality #3: Marlin, O Marlin, Fight on to Victory**

"It was then she realized that the parameters of Rodrigo's sex drive were boundless. Suddenly dread and desire simultaneously washed down her spine. She was giddy in the uncertainty of her actions. 'Fuck or perish,' she tried to tell herself then silently laughed at this rather crude (if carefree) attitude towards matters of the flesh. In truth, what she wanted most was a warm hand to hold on to, a kind ear to whisper in after a hard day at work."

Leanne released the air from her lungs with an anguished whoosh, put down the paperback on the coffee table, and attempted to move her tired bones up off the living room sofa. She grunted once and her head rose up from the pillow and then fell back with a dull thud. She moaned softly through her teeth and the small feet way down at the end of her body nearly levitated an entire three inches off the armrest before gravity crashed them back to the sofa.

Passion-- she thought to herself-- who the hell can think about passion when they don't even have enough energy to get up and take a pee?

Recently Leanne's gynecologist had done her the disservice of prescribing too strong a birth control pill. She had only gotten to the first Tuesday in her little green plastic box when her metabolism, having gone willy-nilly, gave an apathetic shrug of defeat, down-shifted to low gear, and Dwayne had to put her to bed.

"No more job hunting for you," he said and kissed her on the hot, sweaty brow, "Well, for now at least until you get well."

Dr. Harmon had told her that she just needed to rest for about a week, drink plenty of fluids, and then he'd lower the pill dosage and "get that little ol' uterus back in shippy shape." Dr. Harmon was a goofball and somewhat absentminded but nonetheless a true silver-haired Southern gentleman which is why Leanne resisted transferring to Dr. Schelling down the hall (for she looked a little too much like one of those severe matrons in the stained gray wool skirts who ladled out the slop at the Salvation Army soup kitchen).

Sad, sad world-- Leanne thought, and sighed again. She slowly reached out with her left hand past the paperback copy of Kisses in Caracas and picked up a stick of sandalwood incense, transferred it to her right hand, and then probed under the sofa with her left. She knew that every now and then Dwayne tried to hide his smoking paraphernalia under the couch and usually it pissed her off when she discovered one of his nicotine caches but this time she was quite happy to discover a pack of Marlboro Lights and a cigarette lighter taped to the under-lining of the sofa. She threw the cigarettes across the room and lit the sandalwood with the lighter. She stuck the burning stick in a Diet Coke can on the floor and sucked the smoke in through her nostrils with even, disciplined breaths.

If only I could get Dwayne to meditate with me, I'm sure he could quit this stinking habit with no trouble-- Leanne reflected but, unfortunately, the concern for the state of her young husband's tarred lungs threw her breathing rhythms out of sync. After her father had finally died of lung cancer last year, following an

agonizing seven months of chemo, Leanne gave Dwayne the ultimatum: if he wanted to sleep in the same warm bed with her, he damn well better lay off the coffin nails. Dwayne demurred somewhat at first but Leanne knew where his deepest addiction lay (her body) and he soon went cold turkey (up front at least). But she was hip to his hiding cigarettes in little nooks and crannies of the condo and, when she came back from shopping, the windows would be wide open with Dwayne nonchalantly reading The Tribune as if she couldn't smell the Lysol Pine Scent hanging in the air.

I will focus my energies on positive activism-- Leanne said to her inner karma-- I will visualize all the dirty, smelly cigarette butts of this nation rising up off the sidewalks and the alleyways and journeying through the air like bats at night until they arrive above the front yard of Jesse Helms in... in South Carolina (North Carolina?)... billions of butts hovering over his green, green grass and then plummeting to the earth in one smoldering mass of political revenge.

Leanne repeated this mantra several times and it made her feel better, so much better that she didn't even mind that fact that her bladder was full and that when Dwayne got home from work he'd probably make her drink some more of his homemade Basque chicken broth. Not that it wasn't nourishing and tasty, but two consecutive days of this liquid ethnicity were beginning to try her taste buds.

Who knows?-- she thought-- maybe I'll get Bebe to quit next time she comes for a visit. I know she says smoking keeps her weight down but what good is slimness (and Bebe is far from slim anyway) if you die of lung cancer at 51. I know if I can appeal to her sense of oriental cleanliness and discipline she'll probably come around.

Leanne thought of her father again and grimaced but hadn't grieved for long when suddenly she heard the howling screech of brakes from the main drag of Lincoln Park, one block over. She immediately pinched up her face and waited for the jarring smash of steel and glass but it didn't come and Leanne's expression changed from horror to disgust.

It's amazing you don't all kill yourself on the rush hour streets!-- she yelled out loud and a sad looking cockatoo, in the cage by the picture window, warbled in agreement. That's right Rex!-- she shouted back to her lime-green and yellow feathered friend-- Those damn fools deserve smashed fenders for following each other so close! Just so they're not hurt-- she added, wishing not to sound too murderous or vengeful, which might be hurtful to a peaceful karma. Rex turned a sad eye her way and then stuck his head under his left wing, the typical reaction to seeing rainy autumn evenings outside his window.

Leanne focused her own vision beyond the thermo-pane glass to the dark dripping oak tree outside the window. Unlike Rex, rainy days usually made Leanne somewhat cheerful for they invariably led her back to the summer a few years back when she

and Dwayne rowed out to a small island off the coast of Maine: five harbor seals had surfaced around the boat and bobbed their cute canine heads up out of the water with a playful curiosity. It had been raining a steady drizzle since they had embarked from the shore but suddenly their miserable trip to a rocky, barren island covered in gull crap turned into a "happy nature wonderfest," as Dwayne called it. Seeing the seal's huge, dark eyes, long whiskers, and slick-domed heads made Dwayne begin to laugh with huge joyous whoops and he almost tipped over the boat. Until then, Leanne had never really seen Dwayne laugh and considered him to be the most stodgy of the counselors at the Baptist ocean camp where they both worked. She had agreed to the island trip with Dwayne out of politeness but after seeing him laugh she thought she might just want to go rowing with him again.

Leanne remembered their last night together in Maine before the Camp for Christ in the Conifers closed after Labor Day. A huge summer storm had blown in from the northeast and, risking six foot surf and strong winds, she and Dwayne had clasped cold and clammy hands and walked the beach along the edge of the dunes. She remembered how Dwayne refused to kick a dark clump of turf that had been washed up into the dune grass by an especially powerful wave. "It might be a green decapitated head come ashore to rot," he said. He was always coming up with morbid and cynical lines, but his final one that night was somehow appealing, nonetheless:

"My lust for you is as bittersweet as chocolate covered battery acid," he whispered in her ear (or rather yelled to be heard over the crashing of the waves). At the time she found it a much more intriguing come-on than the sorry pickup line Bobby O'Toole had used on her in their junior year in high school. "Im headed for the future & the futur is you babe!!" said the note that Bobby passed to her in chemistry and, when she looked his way, he licked his lips and smiled.

Such behavior was a common occurrence that Leanne had to endure as a cheerleader for the Marlin Marauders boys' sports teams, the price she paid for being a petite cheerleader with uncommonly large breasts. During football season it wasn't so bad because they were outside and she usually couldn't hear the boys' hoots from the stands. Also, when the thick snows swooped down on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (in October) and dumped all the frozen waste of Lake Superior onto their little town of Marlin, Leanne could wear thick sweaters and a cheer-leading parka so she almost looked like all the other girls with thick ankles and heavy makeup who yelled out, "Ra! Ra! Ra! Kick 'em in the knees! Marlin! Marlin! On to Victory!"

It was basketball season that became Leanne's undoing. As a junior varsity cheerleader the previous year, her sweater had hung loose in front but, after a miraculous sophomore summer of mammary growth, when she now shook her pompoms in the gym her breasts heaved up and down with gusto, which caused the tough looking fish mascot on the front of her sweater to take on a

swimming life of its own. "Boom Chicka Boom!" the freshmen boys in the stand would yell while the older boys in the senior class had their own cheer: "Leanne, Leanne, let us be your man!"

Bobby O'Toole, sterling Marlin quarterback, b-ball forward and first basemen, took her on a snowmobile date that January, back to the state forest land and, after parking his Skidoo under an immense hemlock, he immediately tried to get into her day-glow orange snowsuit. "God, Leanne, your tits are awesome!" he said after the first chilling touch of the flesh. So, I've got nice boobies-- Leanne said with a smirk-- Do you like my boobies, Booby? "Yes!!" Then stop giving me grief-- she replied and pushed him off the snowmobile and drove off, leaving him to hike out of the forest through the deep snow alone. Leanne didn't cheerlead her senior year; instead, she joined the Bible club which-- though it was a hangout for the overly sincere outcasts of the school-- was a much easier game to play: the parameters of young piety were a lot safer than those of teenage passion.

Dwayne is poetic at least when it comes to obsession with my ample body-- Leanne thought-- What was that funny thing he said to me last week? Oh, yes, that "Chinaman say fish are flowers of the ocean so when I go down on you and say you smell like fish I'm really saying your love-smile smells as the perfume of roses and petunias." God, Dwayne would even BS his way out of alarming personal comments on my hygiene-- Leanne smiled and looked down on her folded hands on her stomach. Good thing he can cook,

hey Rex?-- she asked the bird, but he didn't reply, being lost in his own world of the underwing.

Dwayne's cooking was how they were finally reunited. After that summer in Maine, Dwayne had gone south to work at some Japanese company and though he promised to write her, he never did and thoughts of him were lost to the hectic pace of Leanne's senior year at Northwestern. After graduation she was hired at Community Consolidated, a non-profit fund raising organization, and one day she walked into a Salvation Army soup kitchen to meet with its director about doing a discoathon to raise money. As she was standing at a coffee urn and looking past the two dour ladies filling the food trays of the homeless, she thought she knew the outline of the man stirring a huge bucket of soup at the stove.

Dwayne!-- she called out and the man at the stove turned around and dropped the heavy steel spoon on his foot when he recognized Leanne. It was Dwayne-- a leaner, sweatier version (it was July and very humid)-- a very corny, melancholic, and romantic Dwayne who dreamt that some day Leanne would walk back into his life like this and forgive his months of silence, especially when considering he was generous enough to donate his time to the needy (actually, it was a gift to Bebe and fulfilled his sister's idea of tithing and/or penance).

[That soup kitchen held mixed memories for Leanne: it was also the place last month where she got groped from behind and ended up kneeling an old vet with a wooden leg right in the scrotum

and sending him to the hospital. She felt truly bad about that, but gut instinct made her very protective of her body space. Leanne's boss, a humorless lawyer from out East (it was rumored he came from big money but was disinherited because of a nasty coke habit), was not amused and fired her. In truth, her assault was just his excuse to get rid of her: they never got along and she suspected (correctly) that he was diverting some of Community Consolidated's funds into a "retirement account." Always thinking in the positive, Leanne considered this messy episode in her life as her chance to find a job that wouldn't make her feel so morally depressed and futile all the time.]

After that chance meeting in the soup kitchen, Leanne and Dwayne's first social date in Chicago had been at the art museum. She remembered Dwayne rubbing the iron lion's mane outside the door and then, while they stood trying to figure out whether the small metal thing in the corner was a sculpture or an ash tray (or both?), a little toddler in Oshbegosh overalls started farting and doing head-stands in the middle of the gallery floor. A guard holding a walkie-talkie started toward the child but she was too quick for the older man and darted behind her mother's legs, peered out at him, and farted once more as if to emphasize her own brand of artistic expression. Dwayne started laughing then like when he saw the seals cavort around the rowboat, and his laugh echoed warmly off the cool museum walls.

Leanne shifted her weight on the sofa (avoid bed sores-- she thought) and reached for her diary on the coffee table. It wasn't

there and she remembered that she had left it by the toilet the last time she had enough ambition to get up, which had been around noon. Instead, she picked up Kisses in Caracas and the green ballpoint pen laying next to it and began to write on the blank endpage of the novel by twisting her body around and leaning the paperback up against the sofaback for support:

I'm embarrassed now to tell anyone but, when I was younger, Jesus Christ always got my vote for the most important man around (admittedly, He didn't get much competition from my dad, who sat watching TV and chain-smoking, or all the boys who wanted to get into my pants in high school). But when I left home and came to Chicago, I began to realize that the most visceral emotions in life-- anger & ecstasy-- must be shared with someone and Jesus was just too abstract to participate with me in the most basic sensualities of existence. Jesus is all ether and I wanted a man of flesh and mud. I think it was for this reason alone I decided I would marry Dwayne.

That first Christmas together in Chicago I sat on his lap and asked-- What do I want for Christmas Santa? This is a test. I'm testing you! And Dwayne replied, "You want me to marry you, I guess." I hugged him and then gave him his present, a tie-dyed T-shirt I found at a funky Dead Head crystal shop in Evanston. On the front of the shirt, black scrawled letters proclaimed "You're my Cook, my Driver, my Way into Existence. I love your cooking.-- Rumi" He still wears it every now and then when he cooks

something that stains to match the tie-dye, like spaghetti bolognese...

Leanne heard a key turn in the front door lock and waited for the sound of Dwayne's shuffle down the hallway. Honey?!-- Leanne called out, and Dwayne walked in and put his hand on her brow. She felt the cool drip of water on her forehead and looked up at Dwayne. He was completely wet and muddy, from the top of his trench coat down to his Florsheim's. He shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of defeat and then put his briefcase down on the coffee table, opened it, and pulled out two lovely, ripe red mangoes. "They're smushed," he said sadly. I love you-- Leanne said, smiling from the sofa, and beckoning to Dwayne to lean down and kiss her-- and I love the mangos you hold in your hands.

** 14 **

Plurality #4: Riding the Greyhound to Jacksonville

[From the anonymous poetry series "On the bus to Florida, November 22"
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i.

Can't be pigeon-holed dissed down pushed
around fucked with no more. Gonna force
some narrative ground to walk upon my
voice about to split the white stone
myth in two. All it takes is the truth:
black brained beauty's no one else's but
her own. So white boy black brother
god howling mother and hip hop sisters
listen well for I won't float on surfaces
any longer. Must dive deep for new riches.

iii.

Too much humanness on the Greyhound from
New York to Jacksonville, Florida, too much
to drown out with TLC grooving over headphones
during the interminable bus stop and go. Like
Baltimore welcoming me with the old white man who
sat next to me, whispering of the fine, friendly
art of masturbation. Scared him away by offering
to psychoanalyze this tendency toward self-abuse.

v.

Midnight in Macon two sisters come aboard, the one sits
by me free of the wedding band, the other younger sits
cross aisle with a boy toddler plopped down beside her.
"Whach you reading sister?" asks my seat mate wearing
gold spangles and ruby red nail polish sophistication.
Thoreau-- I reply and then wish I could take it back.
"Who he?" MLK's inspiration. "That a fact, now?" Yes.
She turns from me with the curtness I always seem to
get cuz of my uppityitis: I be too big for my education.
She asks her friend across the way how Marvin be hangin'.
Hadh't seen him in months. "That muthafuka be messin'
wit Denise again. Told him: Don't fuk wit me bitch or
I shoot you." Well, he listen up? "Hell no! Next week
he come home smelling of that skank weed pussy; I shoot
him right in the chest. That fuka so scared to still
be livin' he toll the cops it was self-inflicted by
accident! Shut up Todd." The young mother finishes off
her bravado and whaps her son to quiet him. My glowing
gold seat mate purses her lip and shakes her finger:

vi.

"Honey, you don't even need to mess with guns. Told my old man before he run off with that who' from Atlanta: I say Bitch, you fuck with me agin, I swear I gonna heat lard on the stove and pour it over your whacka when you sleepin'!" She nods sententiously then sighs, "Goddamn, Greyhound takes years offa a woman!" Amen. Tell me brother Henry David, what you got to say about Self Reliance to the black teenage mother in the 90's? My sisters got off in Atlanta; can't teach them now.

vii.

The last leg of the journey south of Atlanta a tight-looking white woman moved from the front and sat next to me finding no other open seats. She left the safety of the front after Mr. Friendly Onanistic Grand-daddy moved in on her. He want to tell you his fantasies?-- I ask and nod up front. She gives me a nervous laugh and clutches her duffel bag closer to her chest. "You from Macon, too?" she asks and right off I know she's thinking I'm most likely uneducated, going to Miami for work, pregnant or worse. I wave Thoreau to calm her. New York-- I tell her-- I make documentaries. (Obviously low budget ones or I wouldn't be riding buses to scout out locations.) "You went to school for that?!" She has a curt voice that's too incredulous so I decide to give it to her:

viii.

Listen, Honey, I went to NYU film school with Spike Lee! Not to name drop cuz we hated each other, he being an asshole egotist and I being an attempt at womanly cooperation, which I found to be detrimental in this business though I wouldn't want his Times/Newsweek notoriety via Nike money anyway anyhow. Who wants to be branded the spokesperson of a race when the individual struggle is already too much to swallow? Who wants to be snubbed by Oscar for making people uncomfortable with their own guilt? Not me, Honey!

ix.

I've made the mistake of not making it easy for this white woman next to me. She's completely distressed by my outburst. "I Hear You," she says slowly, "I happen to be a physicist at FSU in Tallahassee but I'm also very active in the campus film society. We try always to be very cross cultural." My grand-father was a physicist, the first black graduate from Columbia in that field, but I don't tell the woman this for now I real-ize she's being too sincere for good or useful communication between us. If only I could tell her how Papaw used to quiz me as a child: "What is the wind, child?" Moving molecules! "What are you child?" Moving molecules! "God is...?" Moving molecules...

That's what I do with my work-- I tell her instead-- Move the molecules of life, rearranging our most illusory, transient moments for my pleasure, for my art!

x.

"Oh, that's nice!" she replies then whispers, "Do you think it's okay to use the bathroom?" She points to the back of the bus where a drunk brother has been expounding on females and faggots ever since we left Atlanta. I shrug my shoulders. How should I know? She bores me and I'd like her to leave... I'm wondering if that white guy across the aisle would have the guts to ask me out for a drink. He's sorta cute with his trench coat, thinning brown hair but with the briefcase next to him he could be FBI or a Rush Limbaughite. Can't tell if he's looking my way with those shades on. Why does he wear them on with 3AM morning darkness? Could he assume if I hit on him I'd either berate him about slave guilt or jump his bones like some African beast? Screw voodoo mistress myths!! Screw my Darin back in Jamaica Heights, my sad ebony clone of this white guy who I could need right now. He dropping me off at Port Authority, zootsuitman not even putting down the brief case to kiss me good-bye. Me: "Baby, I'm not gonna to give up my dreams becuz of your mistakes." He: "Don't miss your bus."

xii.

So sorry to disappoint you. I'm conventionally human. I'm chemically woman. I emotionally need man. All the goddamned classes and seminars that told me I'm a goddess, an African Queen are full of shit. And yet when the final shoots are in, the sound bites ready, I can sit in the editing booth, walk the fine line between the common lady with the camera and the uncommon divinity controlling tape and celluloid. I'd like to think I'm both: sweet human dealing with the shit that happens and omnipotent-omnipresent media mistress of my society's soul.

xiii.

Silence! drunk brother at the back to the bus. Your loud sermon begins to tax my patience. But I don't want to turn around and face you; I'd rather just keep your raging dark voice an abstraction. "Sodom and Gomorra! That's At-lahn-ta for you folks! Just a Sodom and Gomorra!" He's beyond loud but everyone's ignoring him and his cheering section (an old sister by the sound of her voice) keeps goading him on with Amen Brother! and Ain't That The Truth! "Yes, the Good Lord knows that all is lost in the South. Not a man in power left, just them women-n-faggots, every one of them!" Amen Brother! affirms the sister and this is too bovine for my liking, 4AM in the morning or not. Shut up back there!-- I yell without turning around-- Your god talk is tirin' me out and this here goddess gots to get some rest! That shut 'em up. Always do.

**** 15 ****

Plurality #5: The Night Bebe Spent in Jail

[The following is the transcript of an interview conducted for a now-defunct magazine, circulation 53, including parents and grandparents of the editor.]

Your name is really that long?

Yep, Mirabelle Miriam Alicia O'Coole. Did they get it right on the arrest warrant?

I think so... That's a rather exotic name for someone from the heartland.

Is it? Were you expecting Darlene or Bonny, Mary Lou or maybe Florene?

No, it's quite beautiful really--

Thanks. Or thank my mother for it. My father just wanted to keep it simple and call me Burutu or Mogan, I can't remember which. But get this, my brother was tagged at the same time with Dwayne Lucian Rory O'Coole. Now that's an ungodly mouthful.

You're a twin?

Yeah. Surprised that there might be a clone of me running around free? Yeah, my little brother came from the same womb, same time, different zygotes, ovums or however it goes. This makes us fraternal or brotherly, right? Though I must say I don't see any peenie between my legs, do you? Just kidding. Anyways, we don't have synchronicity of pain or anything like that. Dwayne probably has little inkling back in Chicago that I'm all the way out West in South Dakota, having been arrested by burly, sweaty cowboys in reflector shades.

Your brother doesn't share your political convictions?

God, I won't say my convictions are political... half-spiritual maybe. But that sounds a little New Age goofiness. I've gotta tell you, this is my first brush with the Man. I've never even got a speeding ticket before. Hell, I never even owned a car that will go fast enough to get me a speeding ticket. On the other hand, my brother has been arrested, twice, or at least two times that I know of. In high school he went through this freaking rock climbing phase and he and a buddy were caught rappelling off the side of a K-Mart in Skokie at 2:30 in the morning. My folks convinced the cops that he was a 16 year old idiot and not an armed robber so they let him go that time with just a warning. Then, in our last summer at Grandma's in Iowa, he got arrested for climbing the town water tower with Joe, this crazy part-Indian friend of ours. The town sheriff got all excited by the glory of making the arrest and yelled through a bullhorn, "You boys getch your butts offa there!" and Dwayne was so startled he fell the last twenty feet coming down off the tower and broke his arm. He also had to pay a \$50 trespassing fine. Consequently, my brother is now a very safe 25 year old marketing whiz with a grapefruit-sized ulcer (which he will not admit to although he chews anti-acids like candy and refuses to cut down on his spicy food intake). I cry for him maybe once a month and then send him a nasty letter accusing him of whoring for corporate America or something in that rhetorical vein. He's awfully kind and usually replies with some dopey Hallmark "you're right and I will try to do better" type of greeting card with a fifty dollar bill enclosed. This last time he attached a PS: "Thought of you sis, sent \$25 to the ACLU." He tries, I guess. At times I getting this sneaking suspicion that he somehow views me as his better half and that he can be a spiritual hollow as long as I provide him with some sort of vicarious link to vitality. I don't know, maybe I worry too much... Is that Pepsi for me?

Oh, yeah, I forgot, here. I hope you don't mind but I got his number from your arrest sheet and called him before coming here to talk to you. He said he'd Western Union you bail money right away but that it probably wouldn't get here until the morning.

Ah, that's sweet of him but I'm sure he probably feels it's obligatory on his part. Christ it's hot in here. Do you mind if I smoke?

No, I wouldn't mind one myself. I think I've got a pack of Camels somewhere here in my jacket... Ah, yes... I'm sorry you'll be stuck here overnight. I'd bail you out if I had any money myself.

I'm in no real hurry. Do you have a light? Thanks. Caffeine and nicotine go nice together sometimes.

The, uh, sheriff is truly embarrassed.. He says he's never had a woman in this jail before.

This jailhouse never held a woman? No way! Or does he just mean he's never had a woman in this jail?

Oh! I, uh, I mean I really couldn't tell. They said--

Probably all their women are stuck at the stove cooking up all those dead prairie dogs and polishing their husband's shotguns. (Nah, what am I saying? They probably just let those poor critters rot under the sun, which is even worse.) Anyway it goes, I'm sure the little ladies around here don't have time for crime!

They said if you agreed to the misdemeanor fine of accidental discharge of firearms in a public place, the deputy wouldn't sue for you shooting him in the foot. I think they'd rather just have you out of here.

But if I don't let them charge me for my actions then it nullifies my gesture of conscientious objection, however pathetic it was. But I guess I'd rather get out of here, too. I'm supposed to be in Colorado by tomorrow, visit an old boyfriend. [*Long pause.*] You know why I did it?

Well, that's why I'm here. I'm intrigued and I think my readers might be, also.

And I thought you were just being chivalrous and coming here to bail me out. What's that magazine you say you edit again?

The South Dakota Radical.

I see... And how many radical readers do you have?

Almost 100. Well, to tell the truth... a little less than that... but we're working truly hard to up the subscription.

Oh, God-- if it's five, fifty or a thousand, I don't care Mister...

Parnell... Brant Parnell... No, no, just call me Brant.

Sorry to get you flustered... I just never seem to remember a guy's name unless I either detest him or am intrigued by him. Anyways, to get to the truth-- to tell the truth, as you say-- I was driving along the interstate listening to Patsy Cline sing "Crazy, crazy for feeling so lonely." (Nice country stations you have out here.) It's obviously hotter than hell, even with the windows down, with my T-shirt stuck to the seat, my cotton skirt just hanging damp at my ankles... sweat beading up and dripping every-where, on my sandals, staining the leather, making me feel gross yet like I was swimming through jungle air, a thought I sorta liked. But overall I was in a pretty bad mood because it was so hot (and my big body doesn't do well in this type of heat) so I'm not surprised I snapped

when I saw that road sign: "Redbow 4th of July Prairie Dog Shoot. Y'All Come, It'll Be Fun!" Fun? Oh, Christ!

We could all hear your Pinto pull up, even over the noise of the gunfire and crowd applause.

Yeah, I lost the muffler in Minnesota a couple of days ago and didn't want to waste the cash on a new one, though I'm sure a cop would have pulled me over eventually even without all this crap happening. Would you like a sip of this?

No, thanks. Do you mind me taping you? I can't keep up in shorthand.

I don't care what you do, being my buddy helping me get bail and all that. Just don't blackmail me later with this when I decide to run for President or something... [Long pause.] Excuse me for asking you this, but I'm curious: did you and your handful of hippie friends standing on the fringes of the crowd holding up "Stop the Slaughter" signs really think that was going to have any effect on those NRA dipshits blowing away any and all prairie dogs popping up out of their burrows? God, it was like some sort of sadistic, demented pinball machine game.

Our organization believes in passive resistance, not violent confrontation... along the lines of Thoreau--

I think Thoreau was gay-- stop grimacing, I'm serious-- or a woman. Yes, Thoreau was a woman trapped in a man's body because he was never hung up on Manifest Destiny, guns, virility... all that crap you guys are so in to.

Well, you... you're just generalizing... by my protest you ought to know where I stand on capitalism, materialism, guns, and, and... anyway, I bet Thoreau had his hang-ups, too.

He didn't mind going to jail for his beliefs.

Even so, Thoreau wouldn't be so loony as to grab a Winchester out of the hands of a startled peroxide blonde housewife and begin waving it at a bunch of brain-dead gun enthusiasts.

Brant... right? You see, I remember your name now, Brant, which is a good thing for you. Brant, I assure you I did not mean to shoot that poor guy in the foot but that was much more sporting than having all those gidgets massacre helpless rodents and a hell of a lot more gutsy than you lackluster PCers waving signs.

Mirabelle, I don't think--

Bebe, please.

Bebe... oh, I like that... Bebe, I commend your desire to save those animals from harm but in the process you injured a human also, a just as valid member of the animals race... even if elitist, violent, and overbearing. If we would all just restrain our bloodlust and realize that any dead flesh, whether man, wild creature or beast of the field, is an injustice to nature if killed under a lack of necessity... Oh, but you probably know all this line, being a vegetarian and all.

Wait, don't assume I'm a vegan or something. I've been known to eat a bloody steak now and then. But you must of seen my bumper sticker: "I won't eat what runs away from me." A friend in Vermont gave that to me and I guess I do hold to that belief in my way of looking at things. When it comes to eating I just don't recite a litany of righteousness like you. God, don't grimace again. I'm just teasing you cuz you're alright and can take it... No, killing for food and partaking of an animal's flesh after death used to be a ritual, a sacred act of energy transference. You

know, like the Indians eating the still-beating heart of a buffalo. They believed that if you showed reverence and humility in the hunt, the animals would come to you as a sacrifice... No more energy transfer, nowadays. It's just a matter of energy destruction with the factory slaughter of chickens, cows, and hogs. Those poor critters would run and never look back if they weren't stuck in those little shit-encrusted pens. I think I might have more respect for the person who eats the animals they kill (on a farm or hunting) than those who let someone else do the ending deed so they don't have to trouble their own safe conscience... I'm sorry, I really don't know what I'm going on about here. If I think too deeply about death, it all becomes confused and I wonder why any of it matters... I remember reading somewhere that the ancient Tsars of Russia used to dine on mammoth meat, a deep frozen treat from the icy tundra waste. With that ancient flesh inside them, they claimed they could make love nonstop through the night and straight up until high noon... Hold my hand, will you Brant? I'm feeling pretty sad right now. Human contact and warmth always seems to help. Through the bars if you can reach...

**** 16 ******Dwayne Returns, Oblivious of Pluralities 1-5**

Tedium is the medium of the masses and like most, I'm so darn tired of worrying about empty calories: eat celery and be damned!

Last Friday morning, weakened by a fad celery diet, I hit my forehead on the edge of a drinking fountain. I was in Daytona in anticipation of an extremely important marketing powwow. I took the bus down from Chicago because planes have been spooking me lately: during take-offs and landings I was doing too much heavy thinking on how unlikely it was that several tons of metal and human flesh could become airborne with such an arbitrary amount of diesel thrust. It got to be so bad that first class stewardesses had to sedate me with several G&T's before the second class passengers had even been seated; only then was I sufficiently able to calm myself to the fate of the friendly skies.

The seventeen hour bus ride had left me woozy and incoherent despite a few hours rest at my Hilton suite. I was walking to the conference room after breakfast and I suddenly became aware of my terrible thirst (business tension tends to parch my throat). I lurched towards a recessed drinking fountain and slurped greedily at the jet of water but after being satiated I reared back too quickly and caught my forehead against the edge of the wall bordering the fountain. It's amazing how much a head wound bleeds and I was quite a messy sight when I stumbled into the Mass Marketers of America Seminar with a sopping red

handkerchief pressed to my skull. It seems now that I'll have a scar over my right eyebrow to match the one over the left...

Shit, I'm going to end up looking like a Klingon. I swear to you that I sometimes feel as though I am the Holy Apostle of Stupidity. On the other hand, I think embarrassment (and guilt in its due place), though painfully relentless in my life, are somehow crucial to keeping me from becoming insufferable... But enough of my tales of woe. Let us instead consider the sad case of Mr. Eric Burden.

Eric Burden was the lead singer of the post-Beatles rock band, The Animals. Even though he emerged out of the smoke of industrial Midlands England, he had the rough and soulfully sweet voice of James Brown. In soul truth, Eric is a black delta bluesman trapped in the pasty white body of an Anglo-Saxon. His entire musical career has been an attempt to get back to his true roots in Mississippi. Even Eric's culinary tastes reek of his desire to be disenfranchised of whitebreadedness. Videlicet:

Eric Burden's Recipe for Cornbread: Preheat oven to 400 degrees Fahrenheit (?? degrees Celsius). In an aluminum bowl, mix 1/2 cup self-rising flour and 1/2 cup white cornmeal (any good Southerner knows yellow cornmeal's for chickens). Fold in one medium sized egg, 1/4 cup peanut oil, 1/2 cup buttermilk and a generous glob of molasses. Pour the batter thinly into a pre-greased pie pan. Cook on the middle oven rack until deep golden brown and firm to the touch, about 15-20 minutes. This is an excellent complement to barbeque ribs and baked beans.

You and I will never be blessed with multiple expressivity, Eric. We will never wake up black one morning. Kafka's metamorphosis is a lie and only a good mind mistress can give us the true blackness of the heart. Unfortunately, it appears that my Mistress has had too dark an intent for I begin to suspect Her video is not an act of artistic devotion: Her editing of my life has not been done in the spirit of the act. She just wants the end products: profits and gold statue kudos. Time now for an academic minute:

In Tibet, art is an act of religious devotion. In certain parts of Africa, what is important is the spirit that produces the art and not the end product itself. In America, art is merely the expression of a neurotic mind. We Westerners associate power as the justification for violence. Tibetans view power solely as the energy to banish all obstacles to enlightenment (violence being the major impediment to that holy state).

[Overwrought by artistic passion after writing that last paragraph, Drew loses all modern narrative restraint and jumps right in with authorial intrusion, despite the protests of the Mistress who has been the model of subtlety in the second half of this written video, allowing the voices of her sisters to emerge with the minimum of metacommentary claptrap: "So, if we are to take the Tibetans as the perfect paradigm of individuals taking full responsibility for their own souls, cannot we apply this ethos to Dwayne's own troubled state for how can some "Mistress of the Mind" make him an unwilling victim of Her art when in truth She can never control his soul without his own permission? I say to

you, take charge Dwayne! Hold a mental magnet over Her collected tapes of your life video! Erase all the allusions and falsities of your created past life! Her dictatorial/authorial role may have condensed your life, giving it a certain abundance that reality always lacks but, but... She might as well just stick diodes on the back of your head, triggering electric impulses and recreating sensory responses via controlled computerization!! O God, deliver us from sterilization! I tell you Dwayne, virtual reality is only a matter of interpretation!]

{The Media Mistress can't believe Drew's diatribe against Her, a most willing partner and product of his own imagination, especially considering She hasn't practiced any of Her video voodoo on Dwayne for the last forty pages or so. She regains a semblance of narrative restraint by hitting Drew on the nuggin with an illustrated edition of War and Peace, rendering him unconscious and allowing Dwayne to continue his inner struggle with Her.}

Drew's right, of course. I have to accept the fact that even a Mississippi river barge would not be a sufficiently large platform on which to dance Her will. For the sake of my mental health and a happy ending to this word video, I must choose between the tedium of my fits of lucidity or stay within the confines of the intoxicating (yet terrifying) corral that the Media Mistress had built around my soul. Buddha, Buddha, Buddha, but this is an unholy crap shoot! If only I can remember correctly what my sweet sister once said to me:

"The mind is a beautiful white pony," says my twin Bebe, "Be careful that you don't fence it in."

"Your mind has given way. You'll find the experience invaluable in your efforts to come to terms with twentieth century living." -- Joe Orton

** 17 **

**Dwayne and the Media Mistress Call a Truce,
Have Some Mixed Drinks While
Drew Passes Out Under the Ping Pong Table**

Dwayne: Geez-us, Mistress, that Orton quote was quite a downer to wrap up the story. Do you really hold to his bleak view of this century? It would have ended a lot nicer if you edited out Joe's quote and ended with Bebe's pony line instead... And what the hell was happening in the second half of your narrative with all the female point-of-view intrusion? You only gave me one stinking chapter!

Mistress: I got tired of your rough footage, all that modern male existential martyrdom angst. Like Benedetta said, it was time for some plurality. Did you remain completely oblivious about the women in your life while you chewed antacids and moaned of meaninglessness? Didn't you like my poem?

Dwayne: I thought it was Drew's poem.

Mistress No, it's really mine, I mean Drew's, I mean ours together after all. I only did what he wanted me to do and you only said what he wanted you to say.

Dwayne: {Suddenly depressed by the confusing possibilities of the created fictive self.} Hmm... I must ponder the crazy ramifications of this schizoid breakdown of authorial responsibility and fractured narrative levels. Perhaps that random s.o.b. Drew can clear things up here... By the way, where *is* Drew? He should be back from the john by now. The poor lad must be accepting candy from strangers or some like evil.

Drew: {Re-enters from bathroom obviously tanked up, one more victim of the American male writers syndrom.} Every time I drink red wine I think of lusht, shame, and a shertain Baptist cheerleader I dated back in high school. I tell you boysh, tits are the all-knowing eyes of lusht!

Dwayne: {Perks up.} Drew's embarrassing display of stupidity reminds me of the time I was working in Maine at a Baptist camp. On a Sunday evening, one of my fellow counselors drank an entire pint of cheap vodka in under ten minutes and we ended up dragging him down to the beach to stop him from punching his fists through glass windows. He lay in a sobbing mass on the wet sand and screamed out Konnichiwa! Konnichiwa! over and over again until he began to vomit. The amazing thing was that the Atlantic red tide was flowing in with plankton dynoflagellates which glowed in the sand every time this guy puked on the beach. These tiny points of light from the fluorescent plankton were a wonderful counterpoint to the twinkling stars up above.

Drew: You were in Maine? I wash in Maine, alsho!

Mistress: Well, of course. You created Dwayne out of your own experiences.

Drew: {Lying down on the floor by the bar.} That's shensory focush for ya, artishtic focush yeah!, narrowing the parameters of reality down till puke and pashion tells it all... Yesh siree bob! Down to a few shensual eshentials... Yes! that ish what truly matters.

Mistress: He's right, Dwayne. It's those little moments that we tend to overlook as we worry ourselves to an early death with considering only "the big picture". If we can try to remember those little minor sensual moments when we die, perhaps we won't regret all our major fuck-ups in life. And such little sensory things also make wonderful material for three second video vignettes.

{The Media Mistress and Dwayne compare moments at the bar-- whales surfacing, a good ice cream cone, the sweaty come cry and the quiet afterwards, a rousing family game of Monopoly with no fighting, fast hard rock without the ear drums bleeding, skiing through a purple-grey

whiteout, laughing laughing laughing-- those moments to keep us all in the flow of things till the bitter end.)

Dwayne: The trouble is that the unreal expectations and epic proportions of Art keep us from accepting simple gratitude for we want every waking moment to fit into some smooth grand scale of meaning. But life is messy, never concise or condensed, so why do we keep on expecting some Modern Miracle of Meaning? Art be fucking us up!

Mistress: {Vehemently disagreeing.} What a minute! Are you saying my artistic manipulation of your mind never excited you? Did you really believe with all your mass media conditioning you can suddenly drop all these expectations you are always trying to debunk and become some fly-watching, lotus sitting, Buddhist monk?

{Drew interruptst their argument as he begins to sing Bertolt Brecht/Kurt Weil cabaret songs very loudly from the floor.}

Mistress: {Changes to the opposite tack of solicitousness.} You know, Dwayne, your fit of lucidity in the haiku chapter, besides giving me a break from editing your mind video, got me thinking that maybe you should take more nature walks. It'll tone your muscles, strengthen the joints, and it might even do something for your hair. The worst that could happen is that you get shot at by some hunter or shit on by a gull. Then you can return to the city, full of clarity and good health!

Dwayne: {Segues randomly and rather violently, confusing the Mistress.} Tell me, why is suffering considered more artistically legitimate than humor? Who ever told us we must all be psychic hypochondriacs and find pains to rub daily, hourly, minutely? I've been thinking that just because someone is better able to articulate their pain doesn't necessarily make it more valid or more poignant or somehow truer.

Mistress: Listen, brother, you're the one caught in the theatre of pain. I offered you some escape. You've chosen to take your own path now. Fine.

More power to you. I just wish you'd stop waxing eloquent about your past and present pain and start living for the future every once and a while, like your sister. Or live in the present, like your mother. Look fondly on the past like your wife or Mimi. Find happiness in--

{Drew, cringing at the loud voice of dissent in his ears, interrupts with a loud moan and crawls under the ping pong table to die in peace.}

Dwayne: {Leaving off niggling about his own inner angst as he sees his creator go down for the count.} Barkeep, have you no decent slate pool table in this bar to shield our poor man in his unconscious state?

Bartender: Ping pong balls don't break windows.

{Drew finally passes out but revives after Dwayne, in a fit of inspiration and *joie de vivre*, puts a quarter in the jukebox and Old Blue Eyes begins to belt out "That's Life". Dwayne off the Mistress his hand and clutching each other tightly, they begin to polka around the room, stomping and laughing, laughing and stomping.}

Drew and the Mistress: {Their voices united from across the room.} Ah, how my heart hurts with happiness!

Dwayne: {As he performs a debonair dip with the Mistress, tilting back her lean body in an arc of contained passion.} But my hurt burns with happiness...
I dance to that.

Vita

Andrew J. Dumsch (or "Drew" to most) was born in the desert territory of Apple Valley, California on February 11, 1968. He has a twin brother who looks like Zapatta (but Drew resembles Maynard G. Krebs). He has lived most of his life in the quiet college hamlet of Big Rapids, Michigan. He received a Bachelor of Arts from Kalamazoo College. In August, 1991 he entered The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, served valiantly as a Graduate Teaching Associate in the Department of English, and in May, 1993 received a Master of Arts degree in English.

He has worked as a naturalist in Maine, editorial assistant in New York, journalist in Big Rapids, and once was a communications flunky for a Japanese auto parts company in Battle Creek. This last sentence reveals the order of his career desire.
